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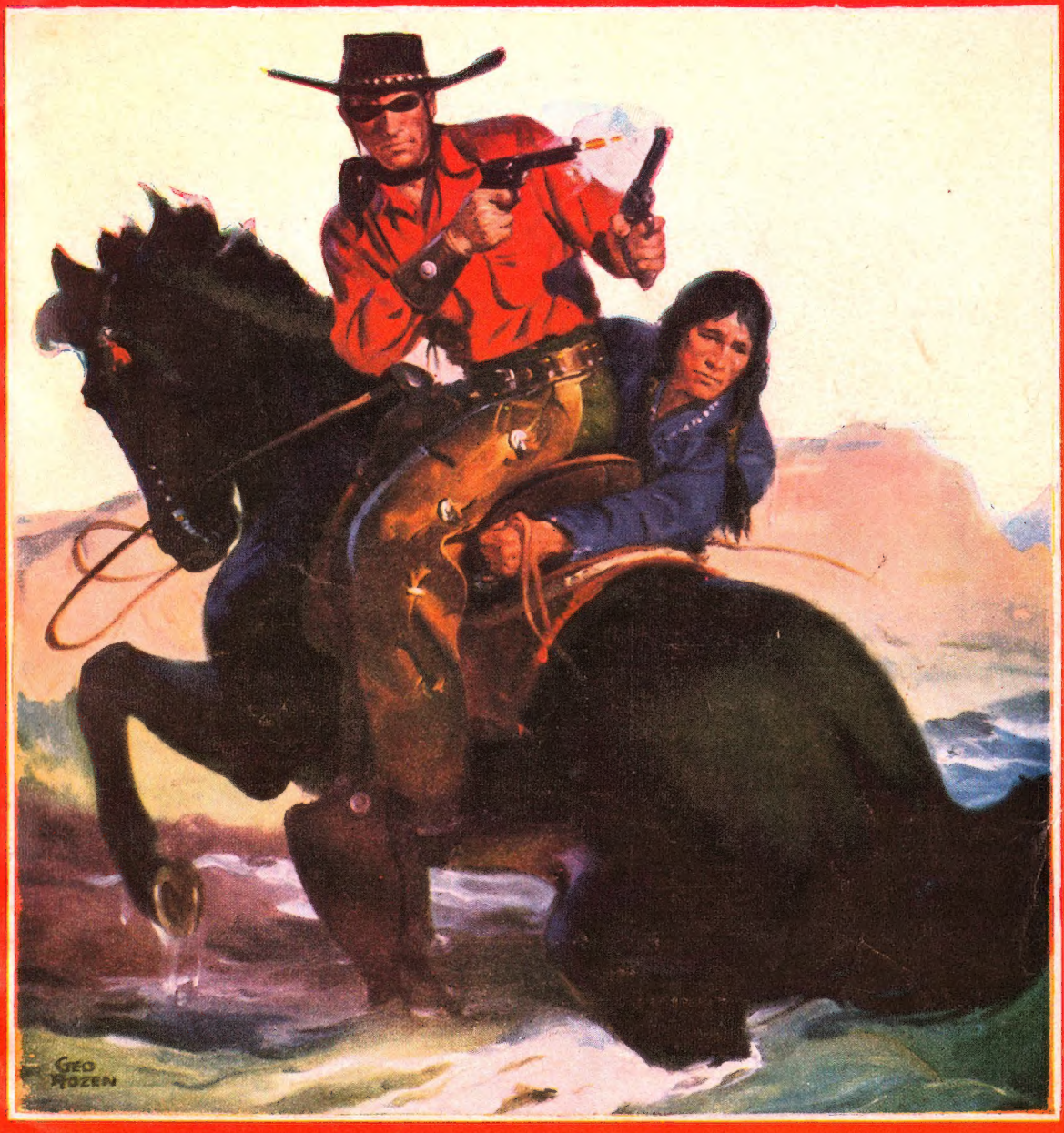

FEATURING: **SNAKE RIVER RENEGADES**

A THRILLING WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

Vol. XXXII, No. 2 DECEMBER, 1952 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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DAVID X. MANNERS
Editor

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THE HORSE CORRAL

Conducted by NELSON C. NYE

"Three Bars"—Sire of Champions

HOWDY, folks!

Three Bars, a thoroughbred by Percentage out of Myrtle Dee by Luke McLuke, is causing a lot of commotion these days in Southwestern Quarterhorse circles. He was not much talked about as a racehorse. His total track earnings did not exceed $21,000 when he was retired after his seven-year-old season.

Nevertheless, he has proved that he is just what the short horse men look for when it comes to transmitting speed.

Owned by Sidney Vail, he is currently standing in Oklahoma at a fee of $300. In the five years since he has been in the stud, he has shown himself to be hard to catch up with when it comes to putting "early foot" on his progeny.

Three Bars' Record

Unraced at two, he made his first start at Louisville's Churchill Downs where he copped $700 for a win in his only race of that season. As a four-year-old he won four out of five starts. At five, he was fired and retired to the breeding pen. At six, he started seventeen times, grabbed eight wins, three seconds, and went the route six times without placing.

He made six attempts as a seven-year-old and nabbed one third and merely helped fill the field in the others.

The Quarterhorse boys first got onto his worth when one of his colts out of a Quarterhorse mare began to appear consistently in the winner's circle at the short tracks. This was J. V. A. Carter's good Barred, out of Ready by Red Joe of Arizona Bred by the Rincon Stock Farm, Tucson, Barred was selected by the Racing Division of the American Quarter Horse Association to be Quarter Running Horse of the Month for April, 1951, a very hard-to-earn honor based solely on performance. In 1948, Barred was named Reserve Champion Stallion at the Tucson Livestock Show and also won the Racing Type Class (Foals of '46) at the Annual Phoenix Quarterhorse Show.

Offspring Wins Honors

Many of the country's best stallions have never sired an individual capable of attaining the honor of being named Quarter Running Horse of the Month. A better class of mares began to arrive at Three Bars' court with the result that to date he has sired thirty-one starters on the short tracks. Thirteen have made the Register of Merit, which means they were able to go at least one of the various distances in A time or better.

Among the illustrious sprinters gotten by Three Bars thus far are three AAA performers: Gold Bar, Tonto Bars Gill, and Bardella.

Gold Bar, a chestnut three-year-old filly owned by Vail & Dana, won the Ruidoso Futurity at 440 yards in :23.3 on a heavy track (1951), the Winner-Take-All at Albuquerque in :22.8 for the quarter (1951), the Juvenile Finale at 440 in :22.8, the Arizona Derby

(1952) at one-quarter mile in :22.4, not to mention several other furiously contested features.

Tonto Bars Gill, a chestnut three-year-old colt out of the world's record holder, Tonta Gal, and owned by Mrs. F. R. Glover, was named Quarter Running Horse of the Month for March, 1952. He won the Rillito Handicap of 1952 with a time of :22.2 for the 440 yards, equalling the Three-Year-Old Colt record and lowering Bright Eyes' track record by one-tenth of a second. He also placed in the 1952 Arizona Derby which was won by Gold Bar.

Champion Daughter

Bardella, a chestnut two-year-old bred and owned by Art Pollard, a former university grid star, first attracted widespread interest when she qualified to run in the Southwestern Futurity of 1952 by winning her division of the trials in an astonishing :17.2 while going away by four lengths. Next best time in the trials—:17.8—was made by Miss Sabre (by Leo), a winner of the first division.

In the Futurity, which grossed a purse of $3,085.00, Bardella broke well, then appeared to have difficulty going into that stride which had given her headlines following the trials. About midway of the route, however, she went into top gear and won, going away, by two lengths over Rukin String (by Piggin String, TB, out of the 1945 World's Champion, Queeny) and Miss Sabre. Time was again :17,2. equalling the track record. The sum of $8,114 was wagered on this important race.

Top Sire

During 1951, Three Bars was eleventh on the Leading Sires list for short horses while among Leading Sires of Juveniles he co-held second place. He leads the first quarter of the 1952 Leading Sires list in total number of races won by his get, and is currently third on the Leading Sires list by total number of winning get.

If there were at this time a leading sires list based on the quality of get, it looks very much as though Three Bars would head it, especially if by "quality" one meant racing class. For, as this is being written, he is the only stallion to have three get in the stratosphere of Triple A rating. ● ● ●

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but can't get started

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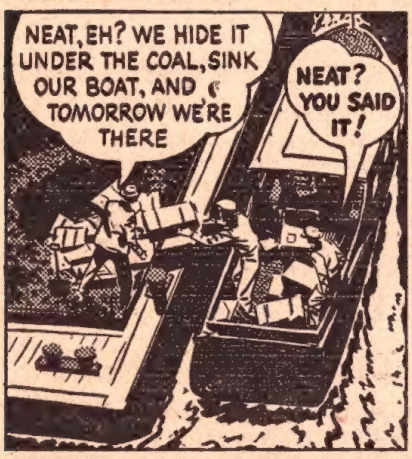

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TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

Lasso Larrups

by

Jack Benton

AT YREKA, CALIFORNIA, rancher John Sanders tried to open a beer can by firing at it with a .22-caliber pistol—but hit his "measuring finger" which got in the way!

IF THE CATTLE RUSTLERS have disappeared from the West, the East can tell where they've gone. At least, Blackstone, Massachusetts, can. The sheriff there received a report about cattle rustlers making off with eleven cows.

WHAT'S-In-A-Name Dept: G. W. Whittle is a Greeley, Colo., carpenter.

ONE OF THE LAST genuine traders of the West was Will Wood, of Abilene, Texas. He swapped an old organ for a piece of land, the land for a horse, the horse for a farm, the farm for a house, the house for a quarter block of Eastland, Texas, the quarter block for $42,000—which he pyramided to $250,000 in oil ventures!

DIDJA KNOW? Texas is a Cenide Indian word meaning "We are pals."

THE AVERAGE rodeo cowboys of today are businessmen as well as entertainers. About one thousand live entirely on their winnings, averaging $8000 to $12,000, while top contestants earn up to $35,000. However, much of this is written off in expenses . . . travel alone often amounting to 50,000 miles a year.

MORE THAN one hundred Western riding horses are maintained at Sun Valley, Idaho, the famous ski resort, for people who like to ride into the surrounding picturesque mountains.

AMONG some Indian tribes the initiation of a young brave consisted in putting on his hand a mitten containing one or more of the ferocious tucandeiro ants. If he could bear their attack, he was considered a man.

JOHN WESLEY HARDIN, a Texas desperado, killed 139 men before he was 21 years old.

UNABLE to walk or run, Jim Payton, displaying the fortitude and just plain guts of the pioneers of old, is a star pitcher at Fort Logan, Colorado. He fanned seventeen men in one game.

THE WESTERN DIAMONDBACK rattlesnake kills more people every year in this country than any other reptile.

THE HORSE ridden by Will Rogers, Jr., in the recent movie based on the life of his cowboy-humorist father, had to be equipped with rubber horseshoes so he wouldn't make so much noise during the picture's filming.

AND, BOY, does it snow in Colorado! Hear about the case of the "lost schoolhouse"? It happened this past winter, near Hesperus. Wade C. Folsom, a teacher at Mayday school, was trudging down the road to where the school should have been—only it wasn't there . . . just a lot of snow. Then he detected a familiar landmark protruding from a twelve-foot-high snow mass—the tip of the school flagpole!

SNAKE RIVER

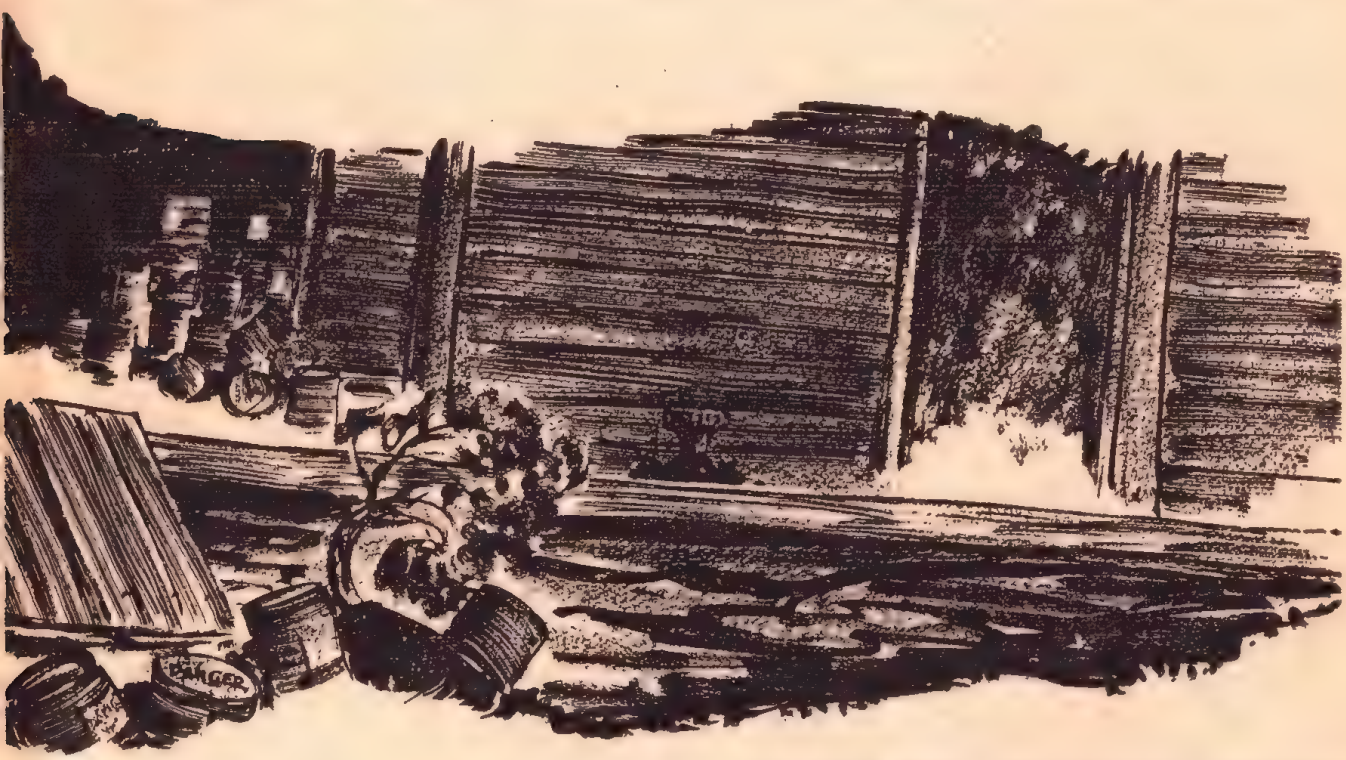
Strangers rescued Morgan from death in the turbulent river, but when he learned why—he wished he'd drowned instead!

CHAPTER I

Flight from Oregon

WAYNE MORGAN and his Indian saddle partner were literally at trail's end! Out northward, the night-shrouded bluffs of Washington Territory offered sanctuary to hunted men. But separating Morgan and Blue Hawk from that unseen land was the Columbia River —turgid in spring flood, debris-choked and a mile wide.

Their four horses halted without touch of rein, knowing this was where flight must end. Behind them, like drums beating in the Oregon night, came the steady sound of pursuit—hoofbeats amplified and



The steamer captain opened fire at the Masked Rider

RENEGADES

A Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

distorted by the granite walls of the John Day's gorge. Twenty Prineville manhunters, sounding like a hundred. Sheriff Jackson's men were within gun range now.

Wayne Morgan was close to knowing despair. Here where the John Day spilled its silty flood into the Columbia, there was no footing for horse or man, upstream or down. He had his choice: towering, unscalable cliffs, or the Columbia's seaward-rushing flow.

Moonrise was a matter of minutes away on this spring evening. Its pale shining would deny the fugitives even the scant shield of darkness, which up to now had been their one small advantage.

Wayne Morgan said in a voice thickened by fatigue, "Nels Jackson knew he had us when the posse forced us into the gorge this afternoon, Hawk. If we had surrendered then we would have spared our stock all this punishment."

Out of the dark beside Morgan came Blue Hawk's reply, in guttural accents instead of his usual careful Mission-taught English.

"Oregon pays bounty on the Masked Rider dead, not alive, Senor. The posse, now that they believe they have identified Wayne Morgan as the masked man, will shoot us down and claim we died resisting arrest. That is, if they find us here."

"*If* they find us here?"

Frustration bit like an acid into Morgan's spirit. Those onrushing horsemen who had trailed them all the way from Prineville would be in sight soon, visible against the foaming white water of the phosphorescent John Day rapids.

CRACK shots like Blue Hawk and himself could easily empty a dozen saddles before they themselves were cut down by posse lead. But it was against their code to take the life of a law officer —even bounty-hunting deputies such as made up the bulk of Sheriff Nels Jackson's posse.

The State of Oregon considered the Masked Rider to be a wanton killer, rather than believing—as so many did throughout the West—that he was a Robin Hood outlaw who always fought on the side of right. The masked avenger had been fighting to defend the rights of a down-trodden nester in the Malheur country two weeks ago, when Sheriff Jackson had come on the scene with his law riders, determined to take the Masked Rider captive, and when, in his alternative rôle as Wayne Morgan he had fled with his Yaqui companion, the posse had followed.

In a few moments now, those lawmen would have caught up with Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk, and the Masked Rider would be at the posse's mercy, even though no man except the Yaqui knew that Morgan *was* the Masked Rider. The possemen would shoot them down with no more compunction than they would exterminate a pair of rabid wolves.

"You're suggesting we try to swim the Columbia," Morgan said to Blue Hawk, more as a statement than a question. "Even in daylight, and in drought season, I doubt if we could make it to the Washington side. Now the river is swollen by melting snow and spring freshets."

The Yaqui at his stirrup took up the slack of the trail rope tied to their pinto pack-horse. Behind Morgan's leggy, hammerhead roan was the magnificent, deep-chested black stallion named Midnight, the Masked Rider's famous mount. The two extra animals, as well as Morgan's roan and Blue Hawk's gray, were near the limit of their endurance.

Morgan knew the Indian was, of course, fully aware of the odds against them. Once they plunged into the river there would be no coming back; they would be at the mercy of the currents.

"Hitting the river would be suicidal, Hawk," Morgan said. "On the other hand, waiting for the moon to silhouette us is just as suicidal."

Blue Hawk shrugged in the darkness and, when he spoke, in his tone was a suggestion of the fatalism of his race.

"The gods give us no choice, Senor." "Senor" was the only way in which he ever addressed his companion of the dan-

ger trails. "But the answer is up to you. I have always followed where you led."

Morgan hipped around in the saddle. The noise of the oncoming Prinevillers was deafening now. They knew this country; knew they had their quarry backed up against the dead end of the river.

"It is better to drown attempting to save our lives," Morgan murmured heavily, "than to wait here and be potted like

WAYNE MORGAN

sitting ducks. At least those manhunters won't split our bounty between them."

The decision was made. The nearness of the posse precluded any further discussion. They lifted reins.

"Hawk," Morgan said, "I've left a lot of things unsaid between us which I wish I had time to say. Luck."

"*Si.* Let us ride, Senor. *Valgame Dios.*"

Stirrup to stirrup, the two *compadres* gigged their mounts out onto the alluvial gravel fan which the John Day, during more than a thousand years, had thrust out into the river. Fifteen feet from the dry ground their animals' hoofs lost purchase and they were floundering in swimming depths.

The two riders slipped over the cantles and eased back into the water, clinging to their horse's tails, only their heads and shoulders above the back flood.

Danger was all about them, in divers forms. A great drift log loomed against the stars, seaward-bound with the Columbia's annual cresting. The floating tree bore down on them menacingly, shaggy roots reaching for the swimmers like clutching hands. Then the great suction of a back eddy pulled the drift aside, buffeted by the John Day's turbulent influx.

A whirlpool vortex pulled them under momentarily. When they came up again Morgan knew drowning was closer at hand than he had realized. They could never make it, even a quarter of the way. . . .

ESAU SAMPSILL, bearded skipper of the stern-wheel river packet *Columbia Queen,* paced his texas deck nervously, ears tuned to the muted sounds made by the crew loading firewood from a long scow alongside. His eyes were fixed on the pearl-pink, ever-brightening sky to eastward, where a moon soon to rise was revealing the remote skyline of the Blue Mountains.

The *Columbia Queen* strained at the hawsers which held her secure to the anchored barge due north of the outlet of the John Day River, two hundred yards off the Oregon shore. Down there in the dark, husky dock hands labored with block and tackle and boom winches, transferring cords of firewood from the barge to the *Queen's* foredeck. They worked silently, in secrecy.

Ordinarily, Sampsill did his refueling in daylight, at various wharves established by woodcutters along the Columbia and the Snake. But tonight—as well as for the duration of this particular run upstream—it was essential that he refrain from tying up at any river dock, where some prying cargo inspector might come aboard.

From his long years of plying the river between Celilo Falls and the head of navigation across the Idaho line, Sampsill knew how much fuel his boilers needed for each leg of the upstream run. Bucking the spring freshets at this time of year required double the amount of wood for the *Queen's* engines.

In view of the illicit nature of his cargo, Sampsill was willing to pay the heavy overcharge for stocking up with wood from Fritz Dumphreys' barge, here in the dead of night. And at that this supply would barely be enough to last him to his next clandestine port of call—Falletti's Landing deep in the Snake River gorge, beyond the reach of prying lawmen.

No running lights showed aboard the *Columbia Queen* tonight. Portholes were curtained, the engine room telegraph muffled. Dumphrey's stevedores worked in total darkness and were being paid heavily for their risky chores. Discovery, both for Sampsill and the barge owner, could well mean the hangnoose.

Dumphreys came up the forward ladder to join Sampsill on the texas deck. The wood man said in a gruff whisper, "Last cord going aboard now, Cap'n. You'll be under weigh by moon-up."

Above the slight sound made by the slapping of waves on the hull of the anchored fuel barge, Esau Sampsill said testily, "Moon's due to show in four minutes, according to my binnacle clock. We couldn't cast off in that time."

Dumphreys grunted, "Ain't anybody going to see you, Cap'n. Nearest sheriff is at The Dalles. Bottomland nesters hereabouts have been flooded out, weeks ago. You—"

The man broke off as Sampsill suddenly gripped his arm, hissing a warning for silence. Distinctly to their ears came the unmistakable sound of steel-shod hoofs pounding along a rocky trail, somewhere on the nearby Oregon shore. Both men swung their eyes in that direction, both knowing that a body of riders must be emerging from the mouth of the John Day Canyon off the starboard beam.

"They can't see us, Cap'n," Dumphreys whispered. "Anyhow, if they did, they's no way to spot which tub this'n is."

Loudly then came a babble of shouting voices, wafting across the floodwaters to reach their ears:

"They ain't here, Sheriff! And they couldn't of doubled back past us, on that narrow trail."

A pinpoint of light gleamed mysteriously in the maw of John Day's vast gorge. Sampsill shrunk back behind Dumphreys, then cursed his own nervousness. Someone had lighted a match and the puny glow, while visible from the *Columbia Queen,* would certainly not carry across two hundred yards of distance.

"Here's their tracks, Jackson!" a voice shouted. "Means our prize hit the river with his Injun pard—taking their chances on swimming to the Washington bank!"

The mumble of men's voices blended unintelligibly then, making no sense to Sampsill or Dumphreys.

"That'll be Sheriff Nels Jackson and a posse out of Prineville, I reckon," Dumphreys whispered. "Bounty-hunters. Must of chased a couple men into the river."

A MAN'S stentorian voice lifted above the babble on the Oregon bank, and Sampsill heard every word distinctly:

"If they're swimming the river, they can't be far! And if they can swim it, so can this posse. After 'em, men!"

A stab of alarm went through Sampsill. The last thing he wanted to happen was for a sheriff's party to blunder upon his stern-wheeler, anchored offshore with no navigational lights showing. What if he were boarded? How could he explain the cargo below decks?

"Deal me out, Nels!" a posseman shouted. "Foolish to try bucking the Columbia this time of year. What's a five-thousand-buck reward—if you're catfish bait at the bottom of the river?"

Dumphreys was leaving the elevated texas deck now, to superintend the casting off of the river packet from his anchored scow. Sampsill, ears straining, heard a horse snort in alarm, then a threshing of hoofs as a rider plunged his mount out into the sluicing waters of the Columbia.

"I ain't giving up the chase at the last minute!" a voice roared wildly through the night. "My horse has swum rivers as full as this'n!"

Sampsill rushed to the starboard railing, peering out over the black surface of the river. He could hear the snorting breaths of not one, but several horses, seemingly close at hand. That would be—could only be—the fugitives!

At that moment the moon lifted its silver disk over the Blue Mountains, and its faint glow laid a shifting track of brightness across the Columbia's turbulent flood.

Caught in that fluid glint of quicksilver-bright moonglade were two men's heads, men clinging to the tails of two swimming horses, followed by two more almost submerged animals. The mighty thrust of the John Day had pushed them almost alongside the moored riverboat!

CHAPTER II

Riverboat Renegades

GRIM excitement claimed Esau Sampsill. Here, almost at hand, were two men he knew to be outlaws fleeing a sheriff's posse. One of them, at least, carried a five-thousand-dollar bounty on his head. Why not lay claim to that reward himself?

Rushing to the forward texas rail, Sampsill shouted to Dumphreys' gang below:

"Hold them lines men! Stand by to take those horses and men aboard—off the starboard bow!"

There was momentary confusion on the deck of Dumphreys' wood barge now, as the stevedores caught sight of the swimming men and horses. The river's current was thrusting them into the slack water alongside the big scow.

Dumphreys' men, obeying Sampsill's mysterious orders, cast off loading nets which the doomed swimmers seized eagerly. Other lines were flung out to keep the horses from being swept past the barge hull.

In the eerie moonlight, the scene had an unreal quality. Sampsill saw the two men—one white, the other an Indian—hauled safely aboard the foredeck of the *Columbia Queen.* Rescuing the four horses would require the use of loading booms and block and tackle. But horseflesh was valuable in this Oregon country.

Grinning in his beard, Captain Sampsill stepped into his wheelhouse and emerged with a Winchester .44-40 in his hands. As he levered a cartridge into the breech he caught sight of another horse and rider breasting the path of moonlight on the river some fifty yards from the *Queen.*

That would be Sheriff Nels Jackson of Prineville.

Below, on the foredeck, all was confusion as skilled stevedores went about the job of hoisting four thoroughly exhausted horses to safety. Dumphreys' crew was too busy to notice the approach of another swimmer.

"Nels Jackson," Sampsill called, "that you?"

Out on the river's crest, a fear-crazed voice made frantic reply: "Yeah—yeah, I'm Jackson! Save me—in heaven's name, whoever you are! My horse is petering out fast!"

Esau Sampsill braced himself on the texas railing, and lined his rifle sights on the Prineville sheriff. It was an easy target, in this moonlight.

The .44-40 made its deafening report, the gunshot smashing in echo off the Oregon cliffs.

The Prineville sheriff, his skull rived by a steel-clad bullet, let go his grasp on the reins and vanished without sound under the menacing flow of the Columbia. The current caught his horse and swept the animal downstream, past the darkened length of the stern-wheeler.

Sampsill was tucking his smoking Winchester under his arm when Fritz Dumphreys came swarming up the companionway ladder.

"Esau, have you gone crazy?" the barge owner demanded.

Sampsill laughed. "Cast off—we're getting under weigh. I need all the men I can get for that railroad deal in Idaho, but not Nels Jackson—not a sheriff who's known to be an enemy of mine."

Fritz Dumphreys ground out frantically, "You fool! That posse on the bank yonder saw that murder just now!"

Sampsill shook his head. "Not that far off, they didn't, with the moon dead in their eyes. Jackson's carcass will turn up somewhere between here and Astoria, too waterlogged to show ary bullet-hole I reckon. And I couldn't let an Oregon sheriff come aboard, could I? Not with what we're carrying below decks. . . ."

Wayne Morgan lay spent and gasping on the solid deck of the river steamer, unable to realize what was going on.

Vaguely he knew that a gunman up on the texas deck had deliberately shot the pursuing sheriff out there in the river. He had seen Jackson's white face just before the Prineville lawmen went under the water. Enemy or not, the brutal deed sickened him.

All that counted right now was that Blue Hawk was safe at his side, though coughing up great quantities of river water. Another two minutes and they would have gone under, Morgan knew.

When he had seen the dark shape of a riverboat looming ahead of him, Morgan had had no hope of boarding it. Now a miracle had transpired. Even his horses had been rescued from the Columbia's grasp.

MOMENTARILY he and Blue Hawk found themselves alone, as deck hands hastily boarded a huge scow alongside and loosened hawsers from huge bitts. Bells jangled somewhere in the bowels of this stern-wheeler. Morgan saw sparks and smoke begin pouring from the tall twin stacks overhead, and felt the hull shudder as the big pitman bars began feeding power to the paddle-wheel astern.

Then the black Oregon shoreline began slipping backward as the steamer got under weigh. The stars gave an illusion of gliding across the sky, past the signboard on the wheelhouse which carried the name *COLUMBIA QUEEN*.

The big scow, with its crew aboard, vanished from sight as the stern-wheeler, under full steam now, began bucking the powerful current of the river. Headed east, for nowhere.

Morgan could see the bearded face of the gunman up in the pilot-house, outlined by the indirect glow of a binnacle light. The man whose rifle had blasted the Prineville sheriff into eternity. Why had a lawman died, while two strangers had been saved?

Then, before Morgan could think that over, deck hands came forward to help Morgan and Blue Hawk to their feet. Burly men, featureless in the moonlight.

men who smelled of oakum and tobacco, sweat and whisky.

"We're in—your debt—*amigos*," Morgan heard himself saying wheezily. "We were—done for—when you fished us out of the river. Our thanks—"

He felt too weak to resist when heavy hands removed his gun-belts and holstered Colt .45s. Other hands relieved the Indian of his only weapon, the bowie knife he always carried, even though he was expert with six-gun and rifle.

A man laughed harshly, close by Morgan's ear, and said cryptically, "Don't thank us, stranger. You hopped out of the frying pan into the fire, if you only knew it. Hour from now you'll be wishing you'd drowned, instead of getting hauled aboard this hell-ship."

Understanding was slow to come to Morgan's brain. But the grim truth was beginning to filter into his consciousness now—the shocking realization that he and Blue Hawk had escaped one peril only to find themselves facing another, trapped, disarmed.

The steamer was taking them away from the menace of that Prineville posse, but where was it heading? And what was the fate this stevedore hinted at so darkly?

"What boat is this?" Morgan asked feebly, still too jaded by his ordeal to care much what was happening.

"Columbia Queen."

"Where we headed?"

"Straight for Hades, son. And that's the truth."

Before Morgan could ask anymore questions, the heavy voice of the man in the wheelhouse called down, "Stow them below decks with the others, Bosko."

Morgan and Blue Hawk felt themselves being half-dragged, half-led toward a murky opening of a companionway leading below decks. The packet's engines made the whole hull tremble. From time to time there was a dull shock and an ominous thud as the bow warded off floating driftwood.

Then they were descending into a black pit below decks. At the foot of the companionway, the man called Bosko herded them down a passageway which reeked of hot engine oil.

Lantern light gleamed ahead of them as Bosko unlocked a heavy door in a bulkhead. A moment later Wayne Morgan and his Yaqui compadre felt themselves being shoved through that doorway into the reeking confines of an unventilated hold. Both fell flat.

The door thudded shut behind them. This compartment was below the waterline, for they could feel the swashing slap of waves hitting the hull. The beat of paddle-wheel blades churning the river raft was transmitted along the keel timbers under their feet in a rhythmic, ceaseless throb.

Morgan rose to his knees and peered around, blinking in the eerie light of an overhead lantern which had temporarily blinded him. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the weak light, he saw that he and Blue Hawk were not alone.

THIS compartment of the river steamer was crowded with men—men with gaunt faces, eyes that stared like eyes of corpses, men with bearded faces and unkempt clothing.

"Welcome to the legion of the lost, gents," chuckled a swarthy man whose head was turbaned with a blood-stained rag. "Two more doomed souls arrive in Purgatory."

Morgan passed a shaking hand over his eyes. The lantern-light revealed him to this staring company as a husky-built man in his early thirties, wearing the bullhide chaps, Coffeyville boots, and flat-crowned Stetson of a cowpuncher.

Most of the men were ignoring him to stare at Blue Hawk. He was probably the first Yaqui Indian any of these mysterious passengers had ever seen.

Blue Hawk's age could not be determined by looking at him. He might have been twenty, to judge from his powerful physique; he might have been fifty, so deep-grained were the lines of his dusky face.

The Indian wore a buckskin jacket, knee-length rawhide moccasins, a white drill shirt. A red beadwork bandeau girdled Blue Hawk's head. A water-logged eagle quill dropped from his varnish-black hair which fell in two thick braids over his shoulders.

Morgan's eyes sought out the swart man whose grim words had welcomed them to the *Queen's* forward hold.

"What are all of you doing here, trapped like rats?" he asked harshly.

The swarthy man laughed in a queer way which made Morgan wonder if he was bereft of his sanity.

"Who can answer that, my friend? Take me, for instance. I am Dominic Tsapralis. A year ago I was teaching mathematics in a school in Thessalonika. Then I shipped on the Greek schooner *Pericles* for a voyage to the New World, an able-bodied seaman."

"Yes?" Morgan prompted the Greek.

"Ten days ago my ship tied up at a Portland dock to take on a load of shingles and pilings for San Francisco. By now she is on the high seas without me. I never expect to see Greece again."

Morgan got unsteadily to his feet. Wherever he looked, he saw men huddled against stanchions, sprawled asleep on the keel, oblivious to the swashing bilge water. Most of these men showed evidence of rough treatment. Their flesh was livid with bruises, their clothing was torn and blood-stained.

"You mean—you were shanghaied aboard this river-boat?" Morgan asked Tsapralis. Is that what happened—to all of you?"

The Greek smiled. "Shanghaied? Ah—I believe I know what you mean by that English idiom. Kidnaped. Yes—that tells my story, stranger. The last thing I remember was taking a drink from a friendly stranger in a waterfront bar in Portland. I woke up on a wagon, bound and gagged. Being taken overland to The Dalles, I have since deduced. Anyway, I went to sleep. When I woke up I was here, as you see me. My pockets are empty, my head spinning, my belly sick."

Wayne Morgan turned to another man, who wore the mud-smeared tunic of a soldier.

"We're all in the same boat—if you'll excuse a sorry pun." The trooper grinned. "I'm with the garrison at Vancouver Barracks. Like the Greek here, I was in a Portland saloon one night. I swallowed a knockout drop, I guess. Anyway, I wound up here, AWOL through no fault of my own."

Morgan and Blue Hawk exchanged horrified glances. This *Columbia Queen* must literally be a slave ship of some sort! Beating upriver with a cargo of kidnaped human souls, bound for some unknown destination which Bosko had said to be Hades itself. It was unthinkable, nightmarish, but it was happening.

"Does anyone know where we're heading?" Morgan asked desperately. "Surely you've been given some explanation."

For a long interval of time, no one answered. The young trooper from Fort Vancouver was asleep.

Finally the Greek commented, "Your guess is as good as ours, stranger. The one thing all of us have in common is being able-bodied. Look at you two; a cowboy, by the look of you, and a red Indian. Look at me—an honest Greek seafaring man, but strong of muscle. Grimes, yonder—a cavalryman. Ambrose, he of the yellow mustache—a homesteader near The Dalles, come to town to buy some bacon, and instead got slugged in a riverfront alley and woke up in this hole. Who can say why we are here or where we are headed?"

CHAPTER III

Dangerous Cargo

MORGAN and Blue Hawk made themselves as comfortable as possible on the planking. On the ragged edge of

sleep, Morgan found himself remembering the ominous prediction of Bosko:

"Hour from now you'll be wishing you'd drowned, insead of getting hauled aboard this hell-ship."

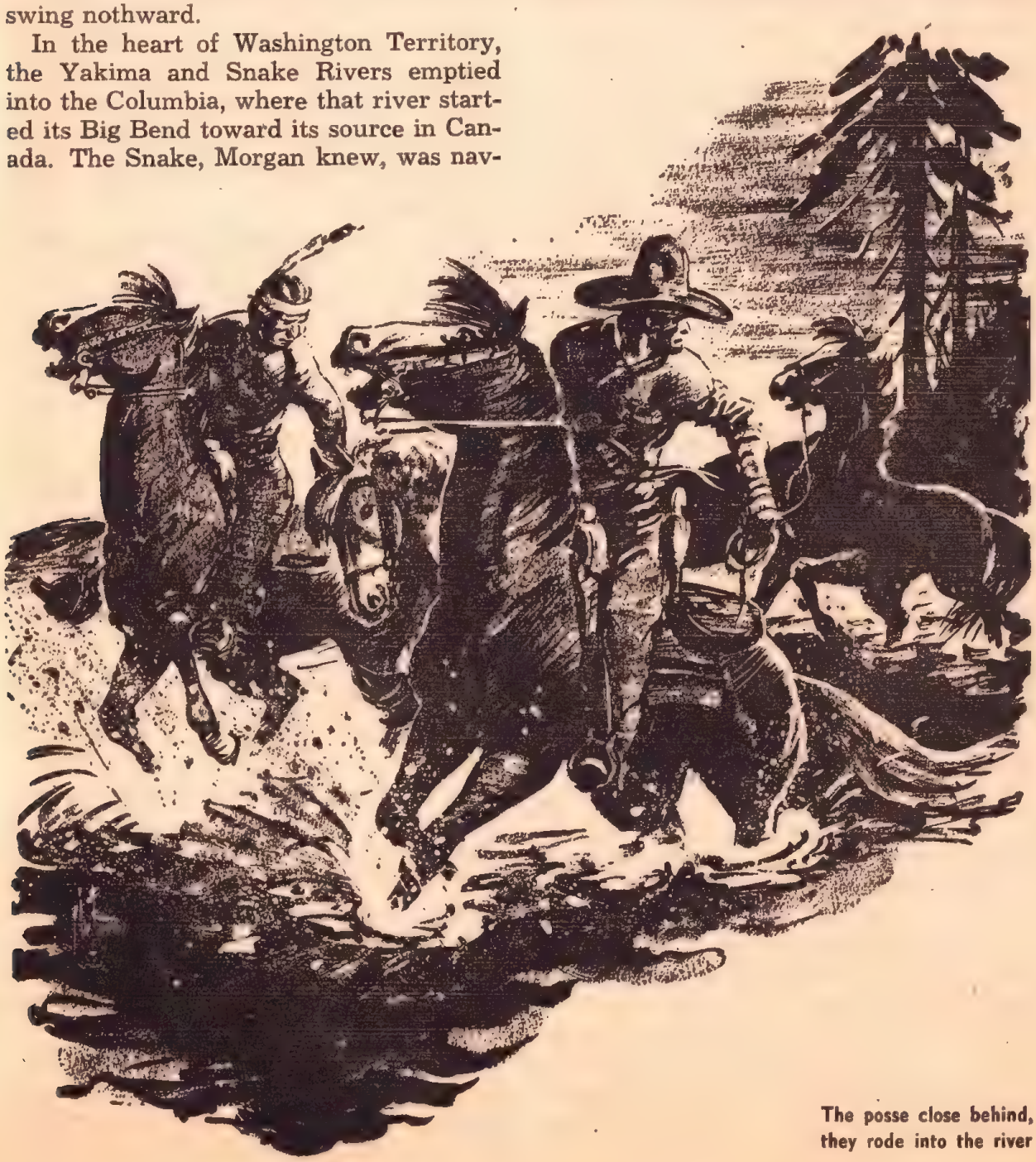
Morgan tried to get a grip on his senses, to reason things out. He knew they were moving upstream. From what knowledge he had of Western geography, he knew that the Columbia River, which at this point formed the boundary between Oregon and Washington, would soon take a swing nothward.

In the heart of Washington Territory, the Yakima and Snake Rivers emptied into the Columbia, where that river started its Big Bend toward its source in Canada. The Snake, Morgan knew, was navigable to these shallow-draft river tubs as far as Idaho.

Idaho—that might be the answer to this nightmare. There was a mining boom going on in the Idaho mountains this year. Were these men headed for the mines, doomed to be slave laborers underground?

"Senor," Blue Hawk whispered in Morgan's ear, "they took our horses aboard. Do you think—"

Morgan signaled the Indian to silence. He knew what Blue Hawk was referring



The posse close behind, they rode into the river

to. In the cantle bags attached to Midnight's saddle were a black cape, Stetson and domino mask—the accoutrements of the Masked Rider, most-wanted outlaw on the frontier.

The Prineville posse which had chased them out of central Oregon had known they were pursuing the Masked Rider, but they had not come close enough to see the faces of their quarry, nor guess, that the Masked Rider and Wayne Morgan were one and the same. That secret was still Blue Hawk's alone.

But at this very moment, the skipper of the *Columbia Queen* might be discovering the Robin Hood outlaw's disguise in Midnight's saddle bags. And, remembering how cold-bloodedly the man had shot the swimming sheriff, Morgan knew he could expect no leniency from his captor. For in Oregon, the reward on the Masked Rider's scalp was payable for his capture dead, not alive. . . .

Dawn found the grubby river packet bucking the silt-laden river northward past the site of old Fort Walla Walla. Captain Esau Sampsill turned his wheel over to a relief pilot and, weary from a twenty-hour tour of duty, made his way to his private cabin on the main deck amidships.

He had been tempted to pause under the overhang of the texas, by the sight of the four horses hitched to stanchions there.

The animals belonging to the two victims of the river who had come aboard at midnight, thanks to Dumphreys' help.

But horses did not interest Sampsill as much as men, right now. He was trafficking in human cargo, a dangerous game at best. Whatever price the four horses would bring—and one especially, the deep-chested black stallion, looked like a thoroughbred—would be so much extra profiit for this run.

He thought, "Maybe Hogarth can use livestock for hauling rock in the Thundergusts," and made a mental note to do some inquiring at Bigpines about the current value of saddle ponies.

Sampsill entered his cabin and closed the door behind him, intending to sleep throughout the day ahead. By nightfall they would be well up the Snake past Pasco and the risky leg of the river voyage would be over.

A chunk of broken mirror attached to the bulkhead cast Sampsill's image back at him and he winced at the sorry picture he made. Pig-small eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep, eyes that showed the extreme pressure he was under. Weather-raw cheeks, shaggy with uncombed whiskers. Under his grubby sea cap was a post-bald skull. An old knife scar made a puckered track along his bull-thick neck, disappearing under the collar of his seaman's shirt. He had been a deep sea man in earlier years.

He was a big man with wedge-shaped torso and legs thick as oak boles. At forty-five he was in his prime. No man living knew this great river of the northwest better than Esau Sampsill. And he was an opportunist who knew ways to make money, outside the law it was true, unguessed by rival skippers.

TAKE this cargo of wharf rats below decks—eighteen men. Twenty, counting the two new ones taken aboard last night. He would make a hundred times the value of his normal freight cargo from those doomed passengers.

Sampson sat down on his greasy-blanketed bunk and began unlacing his heavy-soled brogans. Then he caught sight of a pile of gear which his first mate, Bosko, had dumped into his stateroom during the night.

Three stock saddles, fitted with tooled leather cantle-bags, Bedrolls, warsacks, bridles. Gear belonging to those swimmers he had had Fritz Dumphreys fish out of the river. One of the swimmers was worth five thousand dollars, he had reason to believe.

Sleep was banished from Sampsill's thoughts now as he began going through the fugitives' cantle-bags and warsacks. The first two sets of saddle pouches re-

vealed nothing of great value—cartridges, extra shirts and socks, a money-belt containing a few gold coins which Sampsill promptly pocketed. Tobacco, field-glasses.

One of the warsacks—belonging to the Indian captive, Sampsill deduced—contained a short yew-wood hunting bow and a quiver of primitive steel-tipped arrows, along with pliant doeskin moccasins and a tomahawk more useful as a curio than as a hatchet.

The best of the three saddles, however, was fitted with *alforja* bags of ornate workmanship and should fetch a fat price from the ranchers at The Dalles when Sampsill got around to auctioning them off. A saddlemaker's masterpiece, that kak.

Opening one of the bags, the riverboat renegade pulled out a tightly-packed bundle which puzzled him at first, until he examined the separate pieces more closely. A domino mask, a black beaver Stetson, and a sable-hued cloak of some rich woolen material.

Sampsill's heart began pounding uncontrollably. In all the West, such accoutrements could belong but to one outlaw—the fabulous Masked Rider.

A bounty-hunter himself, Sampsill knew that the Masked Rider had no fixed habitat. He ranged from the Pecos River in Texas to the Pacific shores of California; from the arid wastes of Old Mexico to the evergreen Rockies of Canada.

With feverish haste, Sampsill went to his office safe and from it drew a dossier of reward posters and sheriff's dodgers, giving information on outlaws currently at large and the rewards payable for their capture. Such a hobby paid Sampsill well, for hunted men often sought pasage on the *Columbia Queen.*

A matter of moments and Esau Sampsill found the dog-eared placard he was hunting for, a reward notice he had torn off a saloon wall in Pasco more than a year ago.

WANTED—THE MASKED RIDER
REAL NAME UNKNOWN
NO PICTURE AVAILABLE
Invariably travels with Yaqui Indian named Blue Hawk. Rides coal-black stallion 15 hands high. Indian rides gray gelding. Usually travel with extra roan saddle horse, pinto pack horse. Masked Rider wears black domino, black Stetson, flowing black cape. Expert shot—

"It's him," Sampsill panted, thrusting the reward blazer between his bunk mattress and the springs. "Oregon's posted a five-thousand reward on him, five hundred on the Injun. Which means it would pay me to turn the Injun over to Hogarth for a cool thousand instead of turning him in for Oregon's bounty."

Sampsill hammered his fist on the bulkhead to rouse his second in command, Bosko. In a few minutes the sleepy-eyed river man entered the skipper's cabin.

"You want me, Cap'n?" Bosko yawned.

Sampsill waved Bosko into a chair.

"Know who that was Sheriff Jackson was chasing out of the John Day last night?"

Bosko, still stupid with sleep, shook his head.

"The Masked Rider and Injun pard! No wonder Jackson was willing to plunge into the river after 'em."

Bosko's Neanderthalic face showed his surprise and excitement.

"Hell you say! Them black riggings are the Masked Rider's, ain't they? Boss, we hit the jackpot!"

Sampsill grinned conspiratorially. "When'll we hit Von Falletti's wood yard, you think?"

Bosko went to a porthole to stare out at the passing landscape, getting his bearings. They were opposite the Horse Heavens now.

"Barring a stove-in plank or a sandbar we cain't manage, we ought to hit Falletti's dock around midnight tonight."

The *Columbia Queen's* captain resumed the job of taking off his shoes.

"We'll put the Masked Rider ashore at Falletti's, then, and pick him up on the run back. Him and the four horses. Need them as proof we got the right owlhooter."

Bosko said, "How about the Injun? He packs a bounty."

"Only half what the railroaders will pay us. The thing is, Bosko, keep your lip close-hobbled about who this jasper is. It's a cinch he won't tell on himself. If Falletti guessed who his prisoner was he might doublecross us like he did Leedom."

Bosko's evil face turned grave.

"The Masked Rider won't tell who he is when you turn him over to the marshal at The Dalles, either, Cap'n. But he could sure do some talking about our cargo."

Without undressing, Esau Sampsill crawled under his blankets. Yawning prodigiously, he retorted, "Hell, man, the Masked Rider will be stiff as a poker when I turn him over to the law. Reward's payable on his carcass anyhow. Proving he's the Masked Rider will be easy enough. Them four horses and these black clothes will do that. I'll claim I fished him off'n a sandbar downriver."

Bosko laughed, standing up to leave.

"That'll tie in with what Sheriff Jackson's posse will be saying when they get back to Prineville, I reckon."

Down in the hold, only by a lessening of the intolerable heat did Wayne Morgan and his fellow prisoners know that the *Columbia Queen* had finshed another day's steaming along shifting river channels. They had been fed once during that interminable day, a greasy stew, black bread, and river water which most of the prisoners were unable to keep on their stomachs.

As another night's voyage loomed, Morgan and Blue Hawk made no attempt to strike up conversation with their fellow prisoners. Nick Tsapralis, the loquacious Greek, had proved an entertaining companion, but the other seventeen prisoners had maintained a moody silence, the silence of total despair.

Morgan and Blue Hawk were asleep when the compartment was entered around midnight by Esau Sampsill and the burly dock walloper, Bosko. The glare of a lantern held close to his face caused Morgan to rally out of stupified half-sleep, to see his captors grinning down at him.

The first thing that impinged itself on Morgan's consciousness was the fact that the *Columbia Queen* was not in motion, the ceaseless throb of the paddle-wheel and the rumble of the engines was missing.

"You're leaving the boat, friend," Esau Sampsill said, as he and Bosko hauled Morgan to his feet. "Just you, not the others."

They were out in the passageway before Morgan thought to gasp out, "But my partner! I can't leave my partner!"

"The Injun," Bosko growled, "is headed for his Happy Hunting grounds. You won't be seeing Blue Hawk again."

Morgan's jaw sagged open. They knew Blue Hawk's name! That meant—

"You're the Masked Rider," Esau Sampsill said in a guttural monotone. "Deny it if you want, but we got the goods on you. You're too valuable to treat like our other passengers, son."

Morgan found himself climbing a companionway ladder. He pulled deep breaths of pure, chilly air into his lungs as he lurched out on deck and stared around.

A moon rode a narrow ribbon of star-spangled sky hemmed in by the black rimrocks of a canyon. This, then, was the Snake River gorge. For the Columbia was flat-banked on its wide loop of the central Washington basin, Morgan remembered.

CHAPTER IV

Snake River Landing

THE riverboat was tied up at a small wharf jutting out from a flat bench on the south bank of the river. Beyond that the basaltic cliffs lifted in an unbroken wall hundreds of feet to meet the stars. No lights showed anywhere.

Men were busy loading firewood from the wharf to the *Columbia Queen*. Morgan saw that much as Sampsill and Bosko escorted him at gun's point down a narrow gangplank. Waiting for them at the foot

of the gangplank was a towering man in a dark mackinaw and buckskin pants.

"This the man you want me to put in cold storage?" the wharfman greeted the *Queen's* skipper. "Who is he, Sampsill?"

Sampsill grinned. "Don't know his name, Falletti, but that don't matter. Keep him in irons day and night. He's valuable to me. I want to make sure I don't lose him."

Morgan felt the icy contact of steel fetters being notched over his ankles by the Snake River woodseller, Falletti. He could smell the raw odor of whisky on Falletti's breath as the river man jabbed a long-barreled six-gun against his ribs.

"Whoever he is," Falletti grunted, "from the looks of the leather on his stock he's from around the Mexican border. Long way for even a fiddle-footed drifter to roam."

Morgan did notice that Sampsill had made no mention of his being the Masked Rider but his mind was more on Blue Hawk, and on Bosko's threat that he would never see his Yaqui partner alive again. Anyhow, he realized that resistance was useless in his jaded condition.

Desperation surged through him as Falletti led him along the dock toward shore, past great stacks of tiered cordwood. The river captain and his mate had turned back to superintend the loading of fuel.

It was as dark as the pit of a coal mine here in the river canyon, and the noise of the Snake sluicing between the cliffs was a continual roar like surf in his ears. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light, he saw the vague outline of a weather-grayed shanty built on a shelf of rock above the highwater mark.

Toward this shack Falletti made his way. A horse whinnied from the darkness, and the sound directed Morgan's attention to a small barn and a corral. The whinny he recognized as a greeting from his black steed, Midnight. So the river captain had put the animals ashore.

Passing the unlighted shanty, Falletti

[*Turn page*]

"... **IMAGINE ME** dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and . . . Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."

Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp

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guided his steel-hobbled, half-fainting prisoner up a steep path toward the base of the west cliff. Not until they came to a halt did Morgan discern the dim rectangle of a sheet-iron door guarding the mouth of a natural cave extending into the volcanic rock.

A key rattled in a massive lock and Morgan felt the pressure of the gun-barrel relax as Falletti opened the door. A redolent odor of potatoes and onions and rotting apples assailed Morgan's nostrils as Falletti gave him a shove forward into the darkness.

His ankle irons were connected by a twelve-inch span of chain and the sudden thrust on his back was too much to take in stride. He fell heavily, bloodying his nose on the rock floor.

The door clanged shut behind him. Morgan heard the padlock snap, a bolt fall. Then Falletti's voice reached him:

"Sampsill wants you kept in this root cellar till his tub gets back from Bigpine. You'll have plenty to eat. I'll fetch some blankets directly. Don't try to get loose. Won't work."

Morgan got to his feet, stemming the flow from his injured nose. He saw a tiny disk of gray light and found it to be a ventilating hole in the iron door. Peeping through it, he could see Falletti heading back toward the dock, a spidery black shadow in the clotted murk of this side canyon.

An eternity later, bells jangled faintly aboard the *Columbia Queen.* A light glowed briefly in the pilot-house. Then the spectral shape of the steamer began moving as the paddle-wheels reversed, easing the craft out into the channel. It was soon gone, melting out of sight around a cliff shoulder. With it went Blue Hawk, facing a destiny equally as sinister as Morgan's own. . . .

THERE was a dead man in the forward hold of the *Columbia Queen* next morning. Nick Tsapralis, the most philosophical prisoner in the lot, had fashioned a rope out of his pants belt and quietly hanged himself from an overhead steam pipe some time during the night.

The genial Greek's suicide had a grim effect on the already low morale of the other prisoners, and in the excitement of seeing Sampsill and Bosko cut Tsapralis down and drag him out of the hold no one noticed that their number had been reduced by two. Even Blue Hawk failed to observe, for the better part of an hour, that Wayne Morgan was no longer with them.

The stoical Indian did not reveal the grief which the discovery brought to him. The other prisoners assumed that his partner had died during the night and that his body had been removed and chucked into the river while the others slept.

Blue Hawk did not deny this, but he knew better. He knew that the secret of his partner's dual identity must have been discovered. And Wayne Morgan was either being held somewhere else on the ship, or had been put ashore in the custody of some law officer during the night, as a means of cashing in on the bounty on the Masked Rider's head.

Time dragged like an eternity. And Blue Hawk and his comrades in confinement could not guess that two days and two nights were to grind by before their mysterious voyage came to an end.

They were aware, from time to time, that the *Columbia Queen* was making a halt to take on firewood to stoke her boilers. But as Grimes, the Fort Vancouver soldier, pointed out, the river journey could not last forever and on one of these stops they would see daylight again.

"We'll see then," Grimes commented dully, "whether Tsapralis beat the game, hanging himself. Personally, whatever's in store for us can't be as hellish as what we've already been through."

The other prisoners agreed with Grimes, as did Blue Hawk. Anything would be preferable to the stale air, the intolerable heat, and the stench of this riverboat hold.

It came as a definite release, rather than a beginning of a new phase of horror, when Esau Sampsill flung open the bulkhead door and announced in his bull voice:

"End of the run, men! Pass out single file. Hold out your left arms as you pass me."

Blue Hawk was the first in line, being in better physical shape than any of the others. As he stepped out of the stinking hold, Captain Sampsill snapped a wrist iron around his forearm. The fetter was attached to a long chain piled up at Sampsill's feet.

Every two feet along the chain, another handcuff was attached. As each of the prisoners emerged from the black dungeon of the hold, his left arm was shackled to the chain.

Bosko was waiting, a shotgun under the crook of a hairy forearm, to guide Blue Hawk and his fellow prisoners up a ladder to the foredeck of the *Columbia Queen.*

It was night, but the cool smell of the fresh air was like a tonic to the Yaqui and the other kidnap victims strung out along the chain. Conifer-clad mountains hemmed the river in at this point. The stars were unearthly bright. The riverboat was riding at anchor a few dozen yards off the forested bank. The Snake River was less than a hundred feet wide here.

"This way, redskin," Bosko grunted. Gripping Blue Hawk's free arm the mate led him toward the port side of the deck. Here a section of railing had been removed and a cleated gangway led down into the water.

For a moment, Blue Hawk wondered if this was a Snake River pirate's version of "walking the plank." Then he saw the burly figure of a man standing in waist-deep water at the foot of the plank. The man was holding a sawed-off buckshot gun.

Blue Hawk's moccasins made no sound as he padded down the gangplank. The icy water closed about his ankles. He stepped off the plank into belt-deep water, onto a firm gravel bottom. The gangplank was resting on a boulder, he realized.

"Keep moving, men!" the shotgun-toter ordered gruffly. "We're loading you on freight wagons soon as you wade ashore. Keep moving—keep moving."

Blue Hawk waded toward the bank, the water level shallower with each stride. Behind him like knots on the tail of a kite came the men attached to the thirty-foot chain, the links of which gave off an uncanny chiming noise in cadence to the lurching progress of Sampsill's prisoners.

STARLIGHT revealed two big Shuttler prairie wagons backed up to the river's edge, harnessed teams hitched to each rig. Narrow planks led up into each canvas-hooded vehicle.

Blue Hawk gave a last look at the ghostly bulk of the *Columbia Queen.* He had no opportunity to look around for some trace of Wayne Morgan or their four horses.

The Yaqui was the first aboard the wagon. Benches ran down each side of the box. The wagon driver was peering through the puckered oval opening in front of the canvas hood, to bark out a command:

"Set yourselves cheek by jowl, men. Got to get all of you into this one wagon."

One by one the haggard men clambered over the end gate into the Shuttlers, Corporal Grimes being the last prisoner to climb the bull-bar plank. They sat nine on each bench, facing each other, each shackled to the long rusty chain. As a final precaution the driver locked the chain through the ring bolt in the floor.

The other wagon was being loaded with boxes and bales off the *Columbia Queen.* While that work was going on, Blue Hawk heard Captain Sampsill talking to someone outside, and he listened intently in the hope of learning what fate awaited them.

He heard gold coins being exchanged, the two men muttering the count. Finally Sampsill said, "That's it, Hogarth. Eighteen thousand for the slavers. Six hundred for the supplies."

Hogarth's voice answered, "Pretty steep bargain you drove, Skipper. This makes thirty-three thousand I've got invested in manpower alone."

The riverboat man chuckled. "The work they do'll make you a cool million, won't it? Got to spend money to make

money. This time a year from now you'll be rolling in profit."

So far, Blue Hawk's eavesdropping only added to his puzzlement. Obviously, this man named Hogarth was embarked on a fantastically important enterprise of an illegal nature.

"May not bring you so many men next trip, Hogarth," Sampsill remarked. "Manpower market's getting tight. Too many disappearances being reported. If I don't get at least a dozen men for you, I'll fill up with dynamite and blasting powder next run. You'll be needing explosives as much as men, anyhow."

Blue Hawk heard no more of the conversation as the wagons lurched into motion. Every nerve a tingle, the Indian leaned forward to peer through the open end of the hooded freight wagon. There was enough starlight for him to see that they were moving off through a narrow road that tunneled into the pine forest, away from the river.

He glimpsed Captain Sampsill wading back to his steamer anchored out in the channel. Then the supply wagon pulled in to blot out the view, and a turn of the forest road cut out all visibility.

For three hours the wagons moved steadily along the mountain road. When daylight came, the wagons halted at what appeared to be a relay camp of some sort, for other harnessed teams were waiting in front of a brown tent.

The chained-together prisoners were ordered out of the wagon. They peered about, eyes squeezed tight against the unaccustomed light. On all sides, towering mountain crags hemmed them in. This was a natural meadow below timberline, a hundred acres or so in extent.

For the first time since any of these men had been shanghaied—most of them from saloons and honkytonks in Portland and Oregon City on the far-off Willamette—a hearty breakfast was prepared and waiting for them. Slabs of venison, oatmeal mush, coffee in fifty-gallon kettles.

"Where in tunket are we?" Corporal Grimes asked of the saffron-faced Chinese cook who was handing each of the prisoners a battered army messkit.

"Idaho," answered the Celestial.

"Idaho?" exclaimed the Fort Vancouver soldier. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Then these must be the Thundergust Mountains where that mining boom is going on!"

CHAPTER V

Russ Leedom's Saga

A TOWERING giant in a red mackinaw, wearing an engineer's stiff-brimmed hat over a leonine mane of salt-gray hair, moved along the shuffling line of prisoners as they passed by the cook's station, wolfing down their food.

Blue Hawk, heading the line, knew the man in the red mackinaw was in command here. His very appearance exuded authority and the double shell belts and holstered Colt revolvers strapped to the outside of the mountaineer coat backed that authority. Not until the gray-haired giant spoke, however, did the Indian recognize his voice. He was the man named Hogarth, who had turned over a fortune in gold to Captain Sampsill last night.

There will be no more answering of questions, Foo Yung!" Hogarth snapped, his yellow-flecked eyes flashing lethally as he glowered at the oriental cook. Then Hogarth went on turning to face his prisoners as they hunkered down in a semicircle, elbow to elbow. "Men, eat hearty, I coughed up a thousand dollars apiece for you because you are all able-bodied. I aim to keep on feeding you well. In return, I expect sixteen to eighteen hours a day hard labor out of you. Any laying down on the job, any soldiering, and you feel a blacksnake whip on your bare backs. Keep working and you keep eating."

The prisoners eyed each other in dull despair. They knew, now, why they had been kidnaped. Esau Sampsill was trafficking in slave labor consigned to the Idaho mountain country.

"What kind of work, mister?" inquired

Corporal Grimes.

Hogarth wheeled on the talkative trooper.

"Rock busting, rock toting. Any of you men done any hard rock mining?"

No answer was forthcoming from the eighteen prisoners. Finally the homesteader from Oregon, Jake Ambrose, asked grimly, "Where is this here mine of your'n, stranger?"

Hogarth grinned. "It isn't a mine, actually—it's a tunnel. Two hundred feet long, wide enough for a one-track railroad."

At the conclusion of the meal, the prisoners were reloaded into the wagons. Throughout the day, the Shuttlers moved steadily into the timbered Thundergust uplands. That night they arrived at an abandoned logging camp and slept under the ruined roof of what had been a sawmill.

The nightmarish journey was resumed at dawn. It was nearing dusk of the second day when the wagons entered a deep canyon, past a log gateway opened by an armed sentinel.

Blue Hawk heard the driver mutter facetiously, "End of the line, boys—Thundergust Canyon. 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!' "

When the prisoners once more left the wagons, it was to see a row of pyramidal Sibley tents lining the banks of a swift stream. Lofty granite cliffs hemmed in the outlaw camp.

Blue Hawk stared off up the canyon, to see a beehive of activity. A mile distant, the Yaqui's eagle-sharp gaze made out the black maw of a tunnel. Men, stripped to the waist, were trundling wheelbarrows loaded with rubble out of the tunnel and dumping it. This side of the tunnel, other workmen were leveling and grading a right-of-way up the the canyon bottom.

BLUE HAWK

"Take a rest, gents," Hogarth told his prisoners. "Tomorrow you start your job here." His tone intimated that this would be their last leisure short of the grave.

At sundown, Hogarth's workmen plod-

ded back to the tents under armed guard. One look at the haggard, unshaven faces and Blue Hawk knew they were kidnap victims like himself, men without hope.

One of the most frustrating aspects of their ordeal had been the absolute mystery behind their being prisoners in the first place. Blue Hawk, schooled to patience, had not let curiosity torture him as it had done some of the others. But that night, assigned to a bunk tent along with Corporal Grimes, Jake Ambrose and three men who had been kidnaped several weeks ahead of the new arrivals, Blue Hawk was as eager for information as were the white men.

Their tentmates introduced themselves meagerly enough. They were Jim Bolderbuck, a railroad surveyor who had been grabbed off a job of surveying the future course of the Northern Overland railroad; Slub Harju, a Finnish fisherman from Astoria, Oregon; and Russ Leedom, who had been working as a woodchopper at Falletti's Landing before his kidnaping.

LEEDOM was the spokesman for the trio. A young, ruggedly handsome man of twenty-five, he was not as work-broken and despondent as his tent mates.

"Don't blame you for wondering what you're in for here," young Leedom said bleakly. "There's a grave at the end of this trail for all of us, I can say, for I might as well begin by giving you the worst. You've heard about Northern Overland building a railroad from Missoula to the Puget Sound ports?"

Blue Hawk and his companions nodded.

"Well, the railroad plans to build north to Spokane, to avoid having to tunnel through the Thundergust range here in Idaho. Dexter Hogarth, the big jasper who met your wagons, has thought up an easy way to make himself a million dollars. He's going to build that tunnel and sell or lease it to Northern Overland. Hogarth is a construction engineer who knows his business as few men living do. He's built railroads all over the country and down in Mexico."

Corporal Grimes said bewilderedly, "I don't get it. What's this railroad tunnel got to do with all of us being snatched?"

Leedom shrugged. "It takes men to bore that tunnel and grade a roadbed approaching it. Hogarth couldn't hire men on the open market if he was a billionaire—every able-bodied man on the frontier is more interested in striking it rich on a gold claim than he is swinging a pick and shovel for a railroad. That's one reason why Northern Overland has only shoved its steel as far as Boise. They'd hoped to be at their terminus in Seattle by this time of year. They lost their work gangs to the gold rush."

Ambrose said glumly, "Why should the railroad buy a tunnel from this Hogarth? Why not make their own tunnel?"

The Northern Overland surveyor, Jim Bolderbuck, answered that.

"Hogarth was smart enough to homestead the land at the head of Thundergust Canyon," he said. The only point in these mountains where a tunnel is feasible is right here. If Northern Overland can buy a ready-made tunnel, it would save millions of dollars making this short-cut across Idaho. I have no doubt in the world but what Hogarth will get his price."

Young Russ Leedom laughed bleakly. "Now you can see why Hogarth can afford to pay a thousand dollars apiece for his slave laborers. Bolderbuck here is Hogarth's assistant engineer. He may have his life spared, being a Northern Overland man, but I doubt it. One word from Bolderbuck could send Hogarth to the gallows, after the tunnel's been sold to Northern Overland. And Hogarth knows it."

Corporal Grimes gulped. His face was ghastly as he began to realize the monstrous trap into which he and the other kidnaped victims had fallen.

"You—you mean there ain't a chance for any of us who do the actual digging of that tunnel?" the young soldier asked in a panic-taut voice. "When the job is done—we'll be killed?"

Russ Leedom tried to make his voice gentle. "How could it be any other way? Hogarth's got nine men working with him

as guards. They could slaughter us easily with a dynamite shot and claim it was accidental. Who could prove we had worked here against our wills—especially when no one would ever see our unmarked graves anyway?"

Grimes made a moaning sound deep in his throat. "But I—I can't die this way! I'm engaged to a girl back home in Iowa. She—she'll never know what become of me!"

Blue Hawk saw infinite compassion come to Russ Leedom's eyes. Leedom was bearing up better than any other man Blue Hawk had seen in this camp of doomed souls.

"How about me?" Leedom said. "I've got a girl waiting for me at Falletti's Landing. Regina Falletti. Don't you think my unexplained disappearance is eating out her heart, too?"

Blue Hawk, having no ties with any woman, at least didn't have that added burden to endure. The whole thing seemed to be too monstrous to be happening, this close to civilization. Yet it was possible—in fact, inevitable—that every one of Captain Sampsill's shanghaied victims would drop out of sight forever, once Hogarth's brilliantly conceived railroad tunnel was completed.

All talk ceased as a guard, Luke Standish, came grumpily into the Sibley tent, checked their leg irons, blew out the lantern and turned in on the cot nearest the entrance.

Settling himself under his blanket, Blue Hawk breathed a prayer of thanksgiving that Wayne Morgan had escaped the hellish ordeal which he himself faced in this Thundergust Canyon. Sampsill would murder the Masked Rider, but death was preferable to this. . . .

WAYNE MORGAN passed his first seven days and nights in Von Falletti's root cellar in comparative comfort. The iron shackles were still locked around his ankles, but he had a pile of blankets to sleep on and, with nothing to do, he'd fully regained his strength. The Prineville posse chase and his brief ordeal aboard the *Columbia Queen* seemed like something out of a bad dream now.

He had entertained himself, at first, seeking to break out of the rock-ribbed cave, but as Falletti had told him, escape was impossible. The root cellar was a natural cavity in the basalt cliff. It ended a dozen feet from the iron door. The door swung on a steel post solidly imbedded in concrete. Except for a two-inch ventilator hole in the door, there was no way to look out of the grotto.

Falletti used the cavern to store foodstuffs in—sacked potatoes, bushel baskets filled with luscious Walla Walla apples, onions, slabs of bacon, quarters of beef. Starvation would have been no threat here, even if the prisoner had not been brought three warm meals every day. He felt like a pig being fattened for slaughter.

At night, his dreams were tortured with worry about Blue Hawk's fate; daytimes his thoughts centered on his Yaqui friend.

He knew he would remain here only until such time as Esau Sampsill came back down the Snake River with the *Columbia Queen*. Then he would be taken aboard the riverboat, and Morgan knew that Sampsill intended to murder him and turn his corpse over to a lawman at Pasco or Wallula or The Dalles, in return for the five-thousand-dollars bounty posted for the Masked Rider's capture.

That grim pospect did not bother Morgan as much, however, as did the question regarding Blue Hawk's fate. Perhaps his faithful Indian comrade was already dead!

Not once in this week's time had Morgan talked with his warden, Von Falletti. His meals were brought to him at six in the morning, high noon, and six in the evening, by Falletti's step-daughter, Regina.

Standing at the peep-hole in the iron door now, Morgan could see Regina down at the stable corral, currying Midnight to a glossy sleekness. The girl was uncommonly desirable, to be living in such an isolated spot as Falletti's Landing. The sun rarely penetrated this side canyon, but it did now, and turned Regina's raven tresses to shimmering onyx, as black and

shining as Midnight's coat.

She was nineteen or twenty, Morgan judged, and dressed in a man's shirt and levis and a cream-colored Stetson. On the occasions when she had brought him his meals, Regina had been friendly enough, but would answer no questions.

He enjoyed having her with him, just drinking in the exciting lines of her feminine figure, but there was an undercurrent of despair and terror in the girl which Morgan had been quick to notice. The first day, she had introduced herself as the woodcutter's stepdaughter, explaining that Falletti had married her mother when Regina had been a moppet of four. Her mother had died when she was ten—from Falletti's mistreatment, Morgan surmised from the girl's veiled hints—and since that time Regina had known no other home than this wood camp deep in the Snake River gorge.

There was a hinged panel in the iron door which Regina could unlock. It was large enough to enable the passage of his food trays, but too small for a man to escape through. Morgan had the impression that this root cellar had been used as a prison before.

Morgan had observed enough through the peep-hole, during this week, to know the nature of Von Falletti's livelihood. Up on the mesa above the river rimrocks was a stand of timber, which Falletti paid a crew of four men to cut and saw into four-foot lengths. That could be a bonanza.

CHAPTER VI

Regina

EVERY day, Morgan saw Falletti's men hauling wood down the canyon past his prison, on heavy log stone-boats drawn by mule teams. The wood was unloaded on the wharf jutting out into the river, for sale to the river boats which made infrequent stops at his landing. The men lived in a log bunkhouse opposite Falletti's shack on the river bank.

Morgan saw Regina leave the stable and go into the house. He watched the pleasurable movements of her hips as she walked, liked the wasp-slenderness of her waist. Shortly she reappeared. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, too soon for her to be heading for his cellar prison with a supper tray, but she was climbing up the path toward him, carrying a large basket.

Reaching the iron door, Regina halted. Morgan saw that she was carrying a six-gun on this trip.

"Mr. Morgan?" the girl called softly.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I—I've got to unlock the door to get a basket of potatoes. Will you go to the back of the cave and sit down on that cider press, please?"

Morgan's heart slammed his ribs. He had not dared hope that the girl would ever open the door that blocked his way to freedom. Especially at a time when her step-father and the other men were up on the mesa cutting firewood.

"Sure will, Regina."

Morgan went to the rear of the grotto and seated himself on an apple-juice press there. He saw Regina peer through the peep-hole to make sure he was away from the door. Then she unlocked the big padlock with a key which dangled from a thong around her neck, and opened the door wide.

Daylight streamed in, revealing Morgan ten feet away, with his hands clasped on his lap. As the girl picked up her bushel basket and stepped in, she held the revolver tightly in her hand. The button of her blouse had come loose, revealing the beginning of the smooth curves of her breast. Those breasts were moving now with her quickened breathing. She was obviously frightened.

"Regina," Morgan said gently, "you know I'm being held prisoner here against my will. Do you know why?"

The girl took a timid step forward, facing him. She made no attempt to redo the button.

All I know is that Dad says you're an outlaw. That Captain Sampsill is turning you over to the sheriff at The Dalles."

Morgan smiled. "Do I impress you as being an outlaw, Regina?"

The girl began unloading potatoes from the open sack into her basket.

"That is not for me to judge, Mr. Morgan. I—I only know that I have orders to —shoot to kill, if you do anything you shouldn't. Please don't make me shoot."

Morgan said, "I realize you can't let me escape, Regina. Falletti would kill you if I did, wouldn't he?"

The girl nodded, moisture glistening in her eyes.

"So," Morgan went on, " I won't ask you if you have the keys to these leg irons. I—"

"I don't. Dad carries them."

After a pause, Morgan went on, "How well do you know Captain Sampsill?"

The girl shrugged. "He has been buying fuel wood from Dad every week for several years. Once—last Christmas, it was—I took a trip on the *Columbia Queen,* down to The Dalles. Dad and Russ were with me."

"Russ?"

Spots of color appeared in the girl's cheeks. "Russ Leedom. My fiancé. I was going to marry him as soon as I turned twenty."

Morgan knew a pang of jealous envy for any man who was going to get so exciting a prize. He said quickly, "You speak in the past tense. Where is Russ Leedom now?"

The girl said in a choked voice, "I—don't know. He was one of Dad's woodcutters. We met when I was sixteen. Russ could make lots more money than Dad pays him for falling timber, but he fell in love with me, and I with him. He promised to stay here until I was old enough to—to marry him."

MORGAN wondered what their relation had been. He wondered just how much this so fresh and innocent-looking girl knew of love. He shifted position on the cider press. Instantly the girl was on the alert, lifting her cocked six-gun menacingly.

"But Russ quit? He's not working for Falletti now?"

Some violent inner agitation made the girl tremble.

"Russ—disappeared. One morning he turned up missing from the bunkhouse. The *Columbia Queen* had taken on wood that night. Dad told me that Russ got tired of waiting for me and slipped away on Captain Sampsill's boat."

"But you don't believe that?"

She shook her head. "No. Some of the men think Russ went fishing—he liked to fish—and fell into the river and drowned. But I don't believe that, either. Russ was a good swimmer. Besides, he loves me. He wouldn't have run away without telling me."

A sudden grim prescience touched Wayne Morgan then. He slid off the cider press and came forward, halting only when the girl jumped to her feet and backed away, leveling her gun at his midriff.

"Don't—don't make me shoot you—please!"

Morgan hunkered down on his Justins.

"Regina," he said gently, "I think I know what became of your lover. I think Captain Sampsill—with or without your stepfather's knowledge—kidnaped Russ Leedom."

Regina's jaw sagged open. "Kidnaped him? But why?"

Morgan told her, then, of his own treatment aboard the *Columbia Queen,* and the mysterious presence of nineteen other passengers trapped in the steamer's hold, all of them on board against their wills.

"I've had a week to think it over," Morgan went on. "I have come to the conclusion that Sampsill is supplying men to some illegal operation going on upriver. Slave labor for some mine in Idaho, perhaps. I believe Sampsill snatches able-bodied men at every opportunity and ships them up the river. I think that explains your fiancé's disappearance."

The girl looked up, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, if only I could think so! If only I knew Russ was alive somewhere—"

"Regina," Morgan said earnestly, "I'm sure he is—just as I am sure my own comrade is alive, held prisoner somewhere."

The girl turned away, leaning her head against a tier of sacked potatoes as her emotions gave way to a storm of sobbing. In that instant Wayne Morgan made his move. The leg irons prevented him from striding, but he frog-hopped the intervening distance to seize the girl in a quick, surprise embrace, feeling the yielding softness of her flesh as he drew her to him.

Regina struggled violently, her scream cut off by the palm of his left hand. With his right, Morgan reached around to tug the loaded six-shooter out of her hand.

His mouth close to a shell-pink ear, Morgan whispered: "I won't hurt you, Regina. Please believe that. Promise me you won't scream and I'll let you loose. I have something to tell you."

The girl nodded finally and, trusting her completely, Morgan turned her free and stepped back, barring her path to the door. He glanced out into the canyon and saw nothing to alarm him. Then he turned back to face the cowering Regina.

"Listen," he said swiftly. "You know, don't you, that I have only to hop my way to the barn and make my getaway on any of my four horses, don't you?"

The girl nodded, mute with a numbing horror over her situation.

"But I won't. Not unless you agree to go with me. Are you being held here against your will, Regina?"

"No. I—I'm waiting for Russ to come back. I know he will, if he is still alive. I want to be here at the Landing when he does return—even if I have to wait here the rest of my life."

Morgan said in the softest voice, "I don't think Russ will come back unless someone helps him, Regina. All we have to go on is that Sampsill took his prisoners upstream. Sooner or later I aim to find out where—and why. For your sake as well as my own. Remember a man I love like a brother is Sampsill's prisoner. Perhaps my partner is with Russ this very minute."

SOMETHING like hope lightened the girl's eyes. Her breasts rose and fell again with her quickened breathing.

"If you—escape—Dad will kill me," she whispered.

Morgan answered, "What if I killed Falletti? Would that be any loss to you, Regina?"

"I hate him! He killed my mother by slow degrees."

Morgan thrust the six-gun into the waistband of his chaps and came forward to put his hands on the girl's shoulders, feeling the slenderness of her bones beneath his fingers.

"Regina, I ask you this, and please answer me truthfully. When do you expect the *Columbia Queen* back at the Landing?"

"Tonight or early tomorrow morning. Sampsill has no definite schedule."

"Good. Then do this. Take your potatoes back to the house—lock this door. But leave me your gun. Either your stepfather or Captain Sampsill will come for me. I guarantee you I will make my getaway—in such a way that your part of the conspiracy will never be known."

The girl made no answer. Finally Morgan said, "Of course, if you think I am an outlaw, then you can't trust me."

Regina picked up her potato basket and smiled up at him.

"Of course I trust you. The fact that you didn't shoot me, the fact that you aren't riding out of here now, proves that you are a gentleman, Mr. Morgan."

Morgan grinned, more touched by her native trust in him than he cared to admit.

"*Bueno*, then. Falletti won't know I have this gun, will he? He won't be forewarned that I'm armed and waiting for him?"

"No. There are many guns at the house. He won't miss that one."

"Then we have nothing to worry about, Regina. And remember—act as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. We're doing this for Russ Leedom and your future happiness."

Sobbing brokenly, the girl shoved past him and outside. The iron door clanged

shut and Morgan heard her lock it. By the time he reached the peep-hole, Regina Falletti was running down the steep path toward the shack, hugging the bushel basket to her. Morgan turned his attention to the pistol he had wrested from the girl. It was a walnut handled Bisley, caliber .38, and five of the six chambers carried a cartridge. The weapon felt light in his hand, compared to the two-and-a-quarter pound Frontier .45 he was accustomed to use.

But a .38 slug could buy his freedom every bit as tidily as a cannon ball. The one intangible factor was the time of day Falletti or Sampsill, or both, came to release him from this root cellar. If by night, his chance of overpowering his captors and reaching his horses down at the barn would be good. If by daylight, he might have to run a gantlet of renegade guns both before and after reaching his getaway mount.

As for Regina's loyalty, Morgan took that for granted. She might believe he was an outlaw, but if his escape meant a campaign being launched to trace and recover her missing fiancé, Morgan knew the girl would play her part in the drama to come, without betraying him.

The hours dragged interminably until the return of Von Falletti and his wood-chopping crew from the rimrock timber patch. As usual, they were snaking several cords of fresh-cut firewood down to the wharf.

Dusk came to the canyon finally. Morgan heard Regina pound on a suspended wagon tire down at the shack, to signal her father's wood-cutting crew to supper. If things went according to schedule, the girl would bring his own tray of food after the others had eaten.

Full dark enveloped the Snake River country when Morgan, peering through his peep-hole, saw someone start up the path toward his prison cave, carrying a lantern. His heart picked up its tempo as he recognized the oncoming visitor as

[*Turn page*]

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Von Falletti, instead of Regina. Could that mean that Falletti, knowing his stepdaughter had to enter the root cellar for potatoes, had checked on his private arsenal and discovered the Bisley .38 to be missing?

Morgan palmed the gun, his thumb earing the knurled hammer back to full cock. But Falletti was striding toward the iron door with no attempt at caution. That seemed to be proof that he was unaware that his prisoner was armed.

The woodsman's hob-nailed boots crunched on the rubble outside and Morgan drew back from the door as he heard Falletti unlocking the iron barrier. Before unbolting it, the riverman called tentatively:

"I'm coming in, feller! Belly up to that spud pile with your hands up!"

CHAPTER VII

Showdown

FOR a moment Morgan froze. Did Falletti suspect what had occurred this afternoon? Was he taking precautions to catch his prisoner at a disadvantage, armed or otherwise?

"All right," Morgan muttered, turning toward the pile of potato sacks. He laid the Bisley .38 on top of the stack, back where the rays of Falletti's lantern would not shine on gun metal.

The door opened and the light of the lantern streamed into the root cellar. Falletti saw his prisoner standing there, back to the door, both arms high, fingers splayed out.

The wood seller grunted and stepped into the grotto.

"All the time you've had on your hands, figured maybe you'd dismantled that cider press for a hunk of iron big enough to bash a man's noggin in," Falletti muttered. "I see you ain't got that much sense. You can turn around."

Morgan swung around, making no comment. As a matter of fact he had spent hours trying to take the cider press apart, with the idea of obtaining a bludgeon of some kind, but the bolts had rusted and his fingers did not have the strength to loosen the nuts.

"Sampsill's boat is due tonight," Falletti said. Setting his lantern on the rock floor, he sat down on the sack of potatoes where Regina had been earlier in the day.

Morgan said nothing, but his mind was busy. It was tonight or never, if the *Columbia Queen* was due back within a matter of hours to pick him up.

Ten feet separated him from Falletti. The river man was taking no chances on a surprise lunge. His elbows were on his knees as he sat there facing M o r g a n, a big Remington .44 hanging by the trigger guard from one finger.

Falletti was regarding him quizzically. This was the first direct interest the man had taken in Sampsill's prisoner, and Morgan knew by the furtive intensity in Falletti's hooded eyes that he was up to something.

"What's your name, feller?" Falletti asked.

Morgan shrugged. "What difference could that make to you?"

Falletti scowled. "Plenty. I'm wondering why Sampsill took the trouble to leave you and your four horses here, instead of selling you up the river like the others."

Morgan licked his lips. "Mind telling me what kind of traffic Sampsill is engaged in, Falletti?"

The river man grinned enigmatically.

"Sampsill's secret is Sampsill's secret. This I will tell you, son—Sampsill collects a thousand bucks on the barrel-head for ever able-bodied man he ships up the river. Which means that you are worth more than a thousand—considerably more —to Sampsill."

Morgan remained quiet, trying to focus his mind on the exact spot where he had hidden the Bisley.

"I been putting two and two together," Falletti went on. "Those horses of yours —Sampsill's hanging onto 'em for a pur-

pose. A big black stallion, a hammerhead roan, a grulla and a pinto. They must have some bearing on establishing your identity to a law officer somewhere, feller."

Morgan thought, "Falletti is smarter than I gave him credit for. He's on the right track."

" I don't know what goes on in the outside world," Falletti went on, "but yesterday a tumbleweed cowpoke drifted through here on his way to the Idaho mines. He told me that everybody along the Columbia River, downstream from the John Day, is keeping their eyes pealed for a floating corpse worth five thousand dollars. Even the Injuns at Celilo Falls are more interested in harpooning this dead man than they are spearing salmon, this cowboy claims."

Falletti paused a moment, then went on, "It seems that the Masked Rider got chased into the Columbia by a posse from Prineville. Salty cuss, this Masked Rider. When the sheriff went into the river after him, the Masked Rider shot him. And he ain't showed up on the Washington bank yet. So folks think the Masked Rider drowned."

MORGAN'S face did not reveal his excitement. So Sampsill's murder shot was being blamed on the Masked Rider! Sheriff Nels Jackson would go down on the list as another of the Robin Hood outlaw's victims—another false black mark on his record!

"Anyway," Falletti observed, "I got the hunch that Sampsill fished the Masked Rider out of the river, along with his horses. So I got to snooping around in the barn. Went through the saddle-bags that go with the black horse's kak. You know what I found?"

"What did you find?" Morgan asked dully, knowing the answer.

"A black mask, a black hat, a black shawl affair. The Masked Rider's fancy clothes. Which means *you're* the Masked Rider, son, and worth as much to me as you are to Sampsill. That's why I'm here now. I'm moving you to another hideout. When the *Queen* shows up, I'm telling Sampsill you managed a getaway. I've already moved your horses up to my timber patch."

Falletti stood up, leaning over to reach for his lantern. In that breath of time when his attention was diverted, Wayne Morgan wheeled to snatch the Bisley .38 off the mound of sacked potatoes.

"Walk ahead of me," Falletti ordered, turning around. "I'm stashing you up in the timber tonight. Later we can—"

Falletti broke off as he saw the lantern-light glinting on the leveled muzzle of a gun which had appeared from nowhere in his prisoner's fist. Falletti recognized the gun as one of his own.

"My Bisley! Regina doublecrossed me!"

As he choked out the words, Von Falletti dropped the lantern and jerked up his .44 Remington.

It was kill or be killed, with no choice for Wayne Morgan. He squeezed trigger, and at the precise instant that Falletti's lantern was snuffed out on the rock floor, Morgan had a pinched-off glimpse of his own .38 slug smashing a hole between Falletti's eyes.

In the darkness, Morgan heard the man's body fall back against a pile of sacked apples, then thud to the rock floor.

Gunsmoke was acrid in Morgan's nostrils as he pounced on the dead man and began a feverish examination of Falletti's pockets. He found a key hanging by a twine around the man's neck, and relief flooded through him in spasms as he fitted the key to the lock of his leg shackles and heard the lock spring open.

Falletti had paid with his life for his attempted double-cross of the *Columbia Queen's* skipper. But Morgan was not yet free. If the sound of the single shot had carried to the bunk-house across the canyon he might never reach the barn alive!

Pausing only to jerk the Remington revolver out of the dead man's grasp, Morgan leaped for the doorway. There he almost collided with someone. His gun was leaping up when he heard a woman's gasp and knew that Regina was trailing her stepfather.

"He's dead, Regina!" Morgan whispered, thrusting the still-smoking Bisley into the girl's hand. "Here—take this Bisley back to the house. Better clean it before you put it back wherever it belongs. In case Sampsill investigates this killing, he mustn't suspect you."

The girl clung to him, staring into the black gulf of the root cellar which concealed her step-father's corpse.

"Your horses—Dad took them up the canyon," she whispered. "You'll find them tied at the edge of the timber, ready for your getaway. I—I knew what would happen when you and Dad met. I have no regrets—none!"

Morgan keened the night. There was no indication that Falletti's crew were coming to investigate the shot. Then faintly to his ears came the remote *whoom* of a steamer's whistle rounding the upriver bend of the Snake. That would be the *Columbia Queen,* signaling for a landing.

"I want to waylay Sampsill when he comes ashore tonight, Regina," Morgan whispered hurriedly. "You get back to the house."

The girl turned her tear-wet face up to him. Her lips were moist and slightly parted. They quivered.

"No — no," she whispered desperately. "He is always surrounded with his awful crew—he's never alone. Promise me you'll leave now! Promise me you'll try to find out whatever became of Russ — promise me!"

THE running lights of Sampsill's packet were in sight now, as the stern-wheeler nosed in toward the wharf lights. The first thing Sampsill would do would be to come up here for the Masked Rider.

Morgan measured the risks and realized the girl spoke truth; the odds were against him in any showdown with the riverboat captain. That showdown could come later, but it would come, he promised himself that.

"All right, Regina," Wayne Morgan whispered. "I'll vamose now. Remember, when Sampsill discovers your father's body, you know nothing whatsoever about it, understand? Sampsill will assume I somehow took Falletti's gun away from him. Play it safe, Regina—for Russ' sake if not your own."

The girl reached up to pull Morgan's head down, and her ruby lips crushed hard against his.

"God be with you," she whispered brokenly. He tried to hold onto her, savoring the moment, but she turned and raced down the steep pathway toward her house.

The *Columbia Queen* was tying up at Falletti's Landing as Morgan headed up the skidroad toward the rimrock forest where his horses would be waiting. . . .

Four days of riding brought Wayne Morgan close to the Washington-Idaho border, without having located a single point along the canyon-locked Snake River where Esau Sampsill could conceivably have debarked his human cargo.

On this fourth day he came to a side gulch where a wagon road snaked out of the dense timber to the water's edge. There was no dock here, no wood-cutter's shack; but a painted spar driven into mud some distance out from the river bank showed Morgan where a steamer of the *Queen's* draft might have tied up. A recent rain had wiped out any tracks the muddy road might have revealed.

Over the conifer-carpeted horizon to the east was the Thundergust Mountain country where the gold boom was now going on, drawing treasure-seekers from all over the world to the Idaho wilderness. Upriver would be the end-of-navigation town of Lewiston.

After following the wagon road for several miles back into the mountains, Morgan decided to give up that tangent and return to the river, camping there overnight.

He soon came to the first major settlement between the wagon road's ending—which he mentally dubbed "Painted Post" to identify it in his mind—and Lewiston, Idaho.

He first came upon the settlement when he topped a wooded ridge and saw a cluster of tarpaper shanties, tents and log huts grouped around a bend of the river. There

was a sizable landing dock jutting out in the river here; undoubtedly this was one of Sampsill's ports of call. But was this town, so far nameless in Morgan's mind, the spot where Blue Hawk and the other prisoners had left the *Columbia Queen*?

Hiding Midnight, the pack-horse and Blue Hawk's gray pony in a jungle of brush, Morgan mounted his roan and headed down into the town.

Stabling his horse, he learned from a hostler that this was Bigpine, an outfitting post for Idaho miners. This was where gold-hunters debarked from river steamers, bought their supplies, and headed for the bonanzas back in the hills. It was a settlement built by enterprising business men who wanted to siphon off the business which usually went a few miles further upstream to Lewiston, the main city in this part of the frontier. Bigpine itself was located in Washington Territory.

Not wanting to appear conspicuous, Wayne Morgan asked no questions of the hostler. He continued on to the heart of Bigpine where miners' outfitting houses were outnumbered five to one by saloons and gambling dens, typical of transient boom towns the West over.

Bigpine's one reason for existence was to fleece miners out of their money, coming and going. When the Idaho gold rush petered out, Bigpine would wither away and leave only a few rotting buildings, piles of tin cans and whisky bottles to mark the spot as a town site for curious eyes of following generations.

CHAPTER VIII

Morgan's Manhunt

PAYING ten dollars for a beefsteak and cup of coffee at a canvas-roofed restaurant, Wayne Morgan made his way down to the river dock, the only solid, permanent-looking structure in Bigpine.

There he found a sweating foreman, whose wooden leg prevented him joining the gold rush. He was busy sorting boxes and barrels of supplies in a warehouse which was little more than a roof formed of sewed-together tarpaulins.

"Riverboats land here?" Morgan inquired.

The dock man nodded, eyeing Morgan's tobacco sack eagerly as the stranger in cowboy clothes rolled himself a smoke. Passing over the Durham and papers, Morgan went on, "Boat called the *Columbia Queen* land here?"

"Esau Sampsill's leaky tub? Sure. Whenever he's got any stuff to load or unload. Matter of fact the river has sanded over so's he can't make it up to Lewiston, since the spring floods. That's why Bigpine's getting so much of the river freight trade."

A pulse hammered violently on the bronzed column of Morgan's neck. He kept his voice casual as he inquired, "You here when the *Columbia Queen* docked—week or so back?"

The man nodded. "Helped him load a jag of shingles from the sawmill up the crick. Only freight handy."

Morgan said, "What cargo did Sampsill unload? He wouldn't make the run empty, this far from the Columbia."

The old gaffer lighted up his cigarette, started to hand the makings back, then accepted them without thanks as Morgan waved him off. Tobacco, apparently, was a scarce commodity here.

"Matter of fact," he answered, "the *Columbia Queen* was empty as a busted beer bottle when she tied up last run."

"Surely there were some passengers headed for the gold fields?"

Morgan hung on the oldster's reply. "Nary a one. Tell you why. Boys are boycotting Sampsill of late. He charges fifty bucks to haul a man up from Pasco—think of it! Other boats only charge thirty. Few years back, only five."

Morgan said, "Are you positive Sampsill didn't unload any passengers?"

The old man spat over the wharf stringers.

"'Course I'm positive. *Queen* got in early in the morning. Took on her cargo

of shingles and was steaming back before dark."

Morgan at least had one tangible fact to go on—Blue Hawk had not reached Bigpine. Somewhere between this settlement at the end of navigation, and Falletti's Landing, the *Columbia Queen* had discharged her human cargo. And Morgan's scouting had proved to his own satisfaction that the road's ending he had named "Painted Post" was the only possible point Sampsill could have tied up between Falletti's and this wharf on which he now stood.

"Reason I'm asking these questions," he said, "is because I had a partner who booked passage on the *Queen.* I thought he'd get off here. Is there any other place where he could have been put ashore? He had all his gear."

The gaffer scowled thoughtfully. "Well, down the river a piece where Antelope Crick empties into the Snake, they's an old wagon road that used to lead to a logging camp back in the hills. Sampsill could have tied up at a dolphin spar alongside Antelope Crick, providing your pardner didn't mind wading ashore with his gear."

"Painted Post," Morgan thought. "I should have kept following that logging road yesterday."

He started to turn away, then decided he had not asked his most important question of all. If Sampsill was trafficking in human slaves, there must be some market for slave labor in this vicinity.

"Any place a man could get a job hereabouts?" he asked the old wharfinger.

The old man grinned. "I'll hire you. Anybody'll hire you, on run-of-the-mill jobs. Everybody's headed for the gold fields. Even the railroad's having trouble building up from Boise, I understand."

"Railroad?"

"Northern Overland. Building out of Montana, headed for the seaports on Puget Sound. I understand they're paying top wages for men and can't get 'em."

MORGAN thanked his informant and turned to leave. Then he thought of one more thing.

"When is Sampsill due back with the *Columbia Queen* again?"

"Week from Sunday. He makes a round trip ever two weeks. Ties up here every other Sunday."

After stocking up on food and ammunition at Bigpine's only mercantile—paying five times the prevailing market price for his supplies, because of the transportation costs to this out-of-the-way settlement—Morgan headed out of Bigpine, quite satisfied with the results of his visit here.

That night he camped on the north bank of the Snake, some ten miles downstream from Bigpine town. Wrapped in his blankets, he summed up the results of his scout since leaving Falletti's.

He had definitely established the fact that Blue Hawk and his fellow prisoners had not reached as far inland as Bigpine. He was morally certain that they had been put off Sampsill's boat at the Antelope Creek mooring post. Whoever Sampsill turned his passengers over to had undoubtedly come to the river by way of the abandoned logging road Morgan himself had encountered yesterday.

On the morrow, he could follow that logging road wherever it led. That seemed the only answer to his quest.

He was in saddle at dawn, and reached the Antelope Creek ravine by mid-morning. The river was empty of traffic, so after a brief camp to rest his horses, Morgan turned inland.

He soon realized that following the logging road was a hopeless proposition. Every few miles, side roads snaked off into the hills, either to abandoned logging claims or sawmills, or to outlying homesteads. He might spend an eternity tracing each of those snakelike roads to their ultimate ends. With no fresh tracks to guide him—thanks to the heavy rainfall of a few days earlier—Morgan elected to return to the mouth of Antelope Creek and wait until the *Columbia Queen* hove in sight again.

Esau Sampsill knew the answers to the problems that Morgan faced. Morgan intended to waylay the riverboat captain at any risk to himself and extract the answer

to Blue Hawk's destination from Sampsill, if it meant killing the man.

He had five days and six nights to wait, providing the *Columbia Queen* made it back to Bigpine on Sunday, as scheduled. With Blue Hawk's liberty, likely his life, at stake, such inaction was sheer agony to endure. Yet it seemed to be the only possible course to take.

There was a high bluff overlooking the confluence of the Antelope and the Snake, and on the crown of this high point Wayne Morgan made his concealed camp.

It was around midnight on Saturday that some untoward sound roused him from deep sleep. He rolled out of his blankets and buckled on his guns, keening the night for a repetition of the noise that had awakened him.

Then, above the burble of Antelope Creek over its rocky bed, he heard a clank of trace chains, the blowing of a horse, the grating of a steel-tired wheel on rubble. A wagon!

Morgan's heart slammed his ribs as he headed down the ravine slope, picking his way with infinite stealth through undergrowth too dense to admit the light of the sickle moon. The thick salal and huckleberry brush ended twenty yards from the mouth of the Antelope. And as Morgan came into the clear, he at once backed into the shadows.

A hooded Shuttlers freight wagon was being turned around at the end of the corduroy logging road down there, its end gate facing the river. And as the thin rind of moon cruised out of a fleecy cloud nest high in the heavens, Morgan made out the twin-funneled shape of a riverboat tied up at Painted Post.

That it was the *Columbia Queen,* Morgan was positive. This wagon had arrived at the Snake River to meet the boat by prearranged plan. And in the dead of night—the way Sampsill seemed to operate. The utter quiet with which the riverboat had tied up—without clang of signal bell, without a whistle, without showing its navigation lights—added weight to Morgan's belief that the *Columbia Queen* was transporting another illicit cargo on this upriver run.

HE HEARD a chain clanking, and then, indistinctly in the eerie moonglow, he saw a single file of eight men come down the gangway into the water and start wading ashore, flanked by armed guards. In a matter of moments the men

THERE'S URANIUM IN THEM HILLS!

URANIUM MINING pays but it's no bonanza. That seems to be the general opinion out west to date. You can't count on the stuff because it doesn't run in veins, but in pockets. The country's leading uranium refining center, Uravan, is in southwestern Colorado. About 250 diggings, many of them family-operated, are located in the 50,000-square-mile area where the boundaries of Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico join.

An odd piece of business about it is that modern miners find the precious uranium in a crumbly yellow substance called carnotite . . . . the stuff that Navajo Indians used as battle paint. As a matter of fact, even today the Indian women rouge their cheeks with the ore. The Atomic Energy Commission pays up to $3.50 a pound for the first 10,000 pounds of uranium in any new mining operation.

—Jackson Cole

had been loaded into the Shuttler wagon, which at once got under way.

A lone rider on horseback waited alongside the creek. Morgan saw a beefy shape wading ashore from the stern-wheeler, and knew it could only be Esau Sampsill.

"Only eight this trip?" demanded the man on the horse.

"Hogarth," Sampsill answered, "I've brung you my last man. The supply is pinching off. Like I said last trip, the law down the river is beginning to wonder why so many men are turning up missing. My helpers just can't lay hands on any more saloon bums. At least not the husky giant type you want. Only drunken culls."

Morgan saw the man called Hogarth hand something to Sampsill, and deduced that it was the pay-off.

"My tunnel's about finished anyhow," Hogarth said. "Now, how about that dynamite and blasting powder? When can I get it?"

Sampsill replied, "Your explosives are waiting on the wharf down at Pasco now, bought and paid for. Three ton of dynamite, one ton of blastin' powder."

"How soon can you land it here at Antelope Crick?"

"Take me day and a half to make the run back to Pasco, half a day to load, day and a half to get back. Four nights from now your stuff will be at this landing, Hogarth, unless my tub runs afoul of a sandbar or the river is closed by an avalanche."

"Fine. Can't open the tunnel without explosives, Esau. How much you charging me to ship it, now?"

Sampsill laughed. "Ten times my regular rates. And cheap at twice the price, Hogarth. It's risky, freighting explosives. One dropped cigarette in the wrong place, and my boat's blowed clean out of the water."

Morgan saw Hogarth wheel his big horse around. "You drive a hard bargain," he accused Sampsill. "I could buy all the dynamite I need in Lewiston for half what you're charging me to haul it up the river."

Sampsill retorted, "Only you dassn't let anybody in town know what's going on in Thundergust Canyon. Hell, man, you're lucky you got my boat at your disposal. The wholesaler thinks I'm selling that dynamite to the warehouse in Bigpine."

Hogarth spurred away, heading at a gallop up the mining road, following the course taken by the wagon carrying the eight kidnap victims.

Morgan tensed, a gun in either hand. Sampsill was at the mercy of his guns right this instant, as the beefy riverman started wading back toward the *Columbia Queen*.

But it would be risky, overtaking Sampsill before he reached his half-submerged gangplank. And Morgan knew now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what had happened to Blue Hawk. He had been transported by wagon into those brooding Idaho mountains, in the custody of the rider named Hogarth!

CHAPTER IX

Rimrock Signal

BOUND for his camp at the top of the bluff, Morgan headed into the brush. When he returned to the ravine bottom, the river was empty again; the *Columbia Queen* was steaming upriver toward its wharf at Bigpine.

Leading his three extra horses, Wayne Morgan headed south along the logging road Hogarth had traveled a few minutes before.

By daylight, he would have fresh wagon tracks to guide him past the dozens of forks of the road. And at the end of whatever trail Hogarth's big prairie schooner was traveling, Morgan knew he would find the answer to the puzzle of Blue Hawk's disappearance!

Blue Hawk's rescue was his first objective. When that was accomplished, he would always know where Esau Sampsill was to be found. As long as the *Columbia Queen* plied the Snake and Columbia its evil skipper would have to pay the Masked

Rider's price. . . .

The sun, pouring its merciless heat into the granite-ribbed chasm of Thundergust Canyon, made Blue Hawk's naked back gleam like furbished copper.

This was the Yaqui's twenty-second day of grueling toil under the menacing whip-lashes and shotguns of Dexter Hogarth's armed guards. A day over three weeks of fiendish slavery from dawn to dark, hacking rock with maul and pick-axe.

Most of Blue Hawk's fellow-prisoners —Hogarth's slave labor gang numbered forty-one in all, counting the eight new arrivals of last week — were employed deep underground in the railroad tunnel which Hogarth's engineering genius had conceived more than a year before.

Blue Hawk, and certain other workmen whose extraordinary physiques made them more useful in running the canyon grade toward the nearly-completed tunnel, were assigned to the heavier work under the boiling sun.

A few feet away, young Russ Leedom was cracking a gabbro boulder with maul and wedges. Over in the shade of the canyon wall, a pot-bellied guard named Standish was dozing, alert to wake up if his charges halted so much as a moment in their work. Standish had a shot-gun cradled across his knees, and a big mule-whacker whip coiled beside him.

As long as Blue Hawk and Leedom worked steadily, they were in no danger of feeling Standish's lash. Dexter Hogarth did not permit undue cruelty from his guards, for manpower was hard to come by and must be kept at top physical condition at all times.

Corporal Grimes, one of Blue Hawk's companions from the *Columbia Queen* river voyage—how far back in time that ill-fated journey had seemed!—had defied Standish's authority the third day after their arrival in Thundergust Canyon. Grimes had made the mistake of trying to crack the guard's skull with a thrown rock, when he had thought Standish was asleep.

Blue Hawk and Russ Leedom had had to stand helplessly by and see Grimes' flesh cut to ribbons with Standish's bull-whip. The young Vancouver soldier would never see his Iowa sweetheart again. He had died of his whipping that night, in the tent alongside Blue Hawk's cot.

The whole camp knew that the ordeal of the rest of them was about over. The tunnel was all but finished. They were only awaiting the arrival of a wagonload of dynamite from the *Columbia Queen*, due at the canyon any day now, to finish Hogarth's bore.

Then they would receive their wages—in the shape of a common grave somewhere in this lost gorge.

Blue Hawk and Russ Leedom toiled on. Hours later, a whistle sounded from the base camp, signifying the noon rest period. Standish came out of the shade, dragging a pair of fifty-pound Oregon boots, which he locked to the right ankle of each of his workmen.

That done, the brutish-faced guard headed off along the railroad grade, to eat his noon meal at camp. The Chinese cook, Foo Yung, would be along shortly with his buckboard, carrying food for the tunnel workers.

BLUE HAWK and young Leedom dragged their heavy weights over to the shade of the overhanging cliff and flung themselves down wearily. They had learned to make the fullest use of their infrequent rest periods.

"I figure another couple of days, Hawk, and we'll be out of our misery," Leedom drawled wearily. "All that's holding us up is that dynamite shipment."

"*Si*," the Yaqui muttered. He had come to feel a deep and abiding brotherhood for this handsome young Scandinavian.

"One thing," Leedom said, "I'm glad my girl will never know what happened to me. Regina would grieve her life away if she knew I ended up in t—"

Leedom broke off with a startled oath as a mysterious object came hurtling down from the zenith, almost striking his outstretched legs. The object landed with the softest of thuds and rolled to a halt alongside Blue Hawk.

Staring at it, the Indian recognized it as an oblong bundle, wrapped in a drab Army blanket which gave off an effluvium of horse sweat.

"My saddle blanket!" the red man gasped, coming to his feet and stepping to the extent of the chain which shackled him to the weighty Oregon boot.

Russ Leedom's jaw sagged open as he stared at the mysterious bundle which had, literally, dropped out of the sky. Blue Hawk was shading his eyes with his hands as he looked straight up, along the fluted surface of the granite scarp overhead.

The Indian's flint-black eyes flashed with excitement as he saw a tiny blur of movement, up there on the skyline a hundred feet straight up. Sharply etched against the hot Idaho sky was the head and shoulders of a man — the Masked Rider!

He saw his partner wave, then withdraw from sight. The Masked Rider, Morgan, had been spying on Thundergust Canyon, waiting for a chance when his Yaqui partner was not under the surveillance of an armed guard! By some miracle, Morgan had escaped his captors!

"What in hell is that?" Russ Leedom demanded, as he saw Blue Hawk wheel about and drop to his knees beside the blanket-wrapped bundle. "Where could it have come from?"

"I have told you of my *amigo*, Wayne Morgan," Blue Hawk said, his calloused fingers busy untying a knotted rawhide thong which bound the bundle. "He threw this package to us, *amigo*."

"But you said Morgan must be dead by now!"

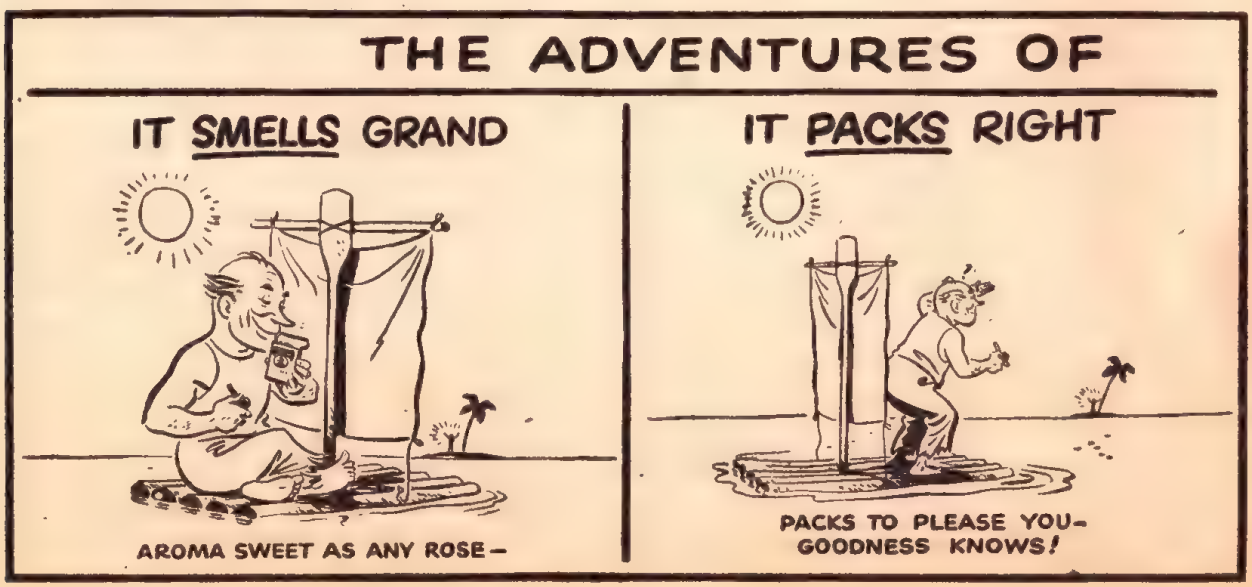
Blue Hawk shook his head. "He is alive, senor! He is up on the rim over our heads. He dropped the bundle to us."

Russ Leedom scuttled forward, frowning puzzledly as he saw what the blanket contained. A yew-wood hunting bow and a single ashwood arrow, feathered and steel-tipped. With the bow was a sheet of paper, carefully tied to the bowstring.

Blue Hawk, who rarely showed any surface emotion, was trembling visibly now as he unfolded the sheet of paper. A stub of pencil fell out as he read Morgan's smuggled note:

I have been spying on your work gang for three days now, waiting a chance to attract your attention, but you never look up. Tell me what your situation is by writing on the back of this paper. Shoot the arrow up to me, tying the paper to the arrow. I have counted nine guards, the Chinese cook and Hogarth. Darkness has prevented me from knowing how you prisoners are disposed of at night and where the guards sleep. Jot down all possible information as I am coming down over the rim by rope shortly after dark tonight. Time is short.

Blue Hawk handed the message to Russ Leedom. He saw tears spring to the young giant's eyes as he rapidly scanned Morgan's words. For the first time in months,



hope for the future had rekindled in Leedom's heart.

Picking up the stub of pencil, Blue Hawk took the paper from Leedom and spread it out on a flat rock. Then he began writing—the Yaqui had been educated in a Mission school in Arizona in his youth—

Guards sleep in each tent, first cot inside doorway. My tent is third from east end of camp. We are kept chained nights. Hogarth sleeps in the red wagon. Chinese cook stays at gate at mouth of canyon as guard. There are no dogs. A sentry patrols camp at night in 4-hour shifts—watch for him. God bless you, my brother.

Russ Leedom watched fascinated as Blue Hawk yanked several black hairs from his own scalp and used the strands to tie the message around the shaft of the arrow.

HALF a mile away, toward the camp, they could see Foo Yung heading up the canyon with the grub wagon. A curve of the Thundergust gorge shielded them from the view of the guards who during the noon hour would be congregated in front of the tunnel mouth.

The Indian notched his arrow to the bowstring and aimed it straight upward, then carefully altered the angle off vertical. The sturdy yew bow made its arch, and the Yaqui released the steel-tipped shaft with a musical *twinnnng*. So fast did the arrow wing skyward that it was lost to Russ Leedom's eye.

Blue Hawk remained squinting upward, as he saw the arrow reach the apex of its flight, well above the rim of the cliff. Then, falling, it disappeared from view, and the Indian relaxed. He had had to gamble that a current of air would not let the arrow fall back into the canyon.

"Senor Wayne has our message," Blue Hawk said simply. "Now this bow and the blanket must be hidden from Foo Yung's eyes."

When the wagon driven by the Chinese halted and the cook placed their boxes of food on a handy rock, the two prisoners came back into the torrid sunshine, dragging their heavy weights behind them.

The grub wagon jogged on out of sight, on its way to the waiting guards and workmen at the tunnel. And when Blue Hawk and Russ Leedom glanced upward, they saw no sign of Wayne Morgan against the skyline. Only the heat-shimmering rock and the gray-green crowns of the sugar pines and hemlock and spruce up there.

Their appetites were gone, but they forced themselves to eat. Blue Hawk's bow and the blanket which had cushioned it against damage on its drop had been hidden behind boulders and covered over with gravel, secure against discovery by Standish.

Foo Yung's wagon rattled past, half an hour later, on his return journey to the

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

WITH EVERY PUFF YOUR PLEASURE GROWS!
-with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.

It costs no more to get the best!

camp down-canyon. The rolling dust clouds had obscured the wagon from view when another object clattered on the rocks nearby.

Russ Leedom retrieved the object, which proved to be a split twig with a tightly-folded roll of paper in it. Wayne Morgan had retrieved the arrow and its message. This was his reply.

Getting Blue Hawk's nod of permission, Russ Leedom unfolded the paper and read in a choked voice:

Bueno. I will see you some time tonight. Do not worry about the sentinel spotting me. Under no circumstances let anyone other than your companion know that a rescue attempt is under way. Their excitement might alert Hogarth to post a heavy guard tonight.

There is one exception to this. If there is a prisoner among you named Russ Leedom, tell him I owe my own life to Regina Falletti, and that she is waiting for him. If Leedom is not one of Hogarth's slaves, the girl will be broken-hearted.

Russ Leedom buried his face in his hands and wept unashamed. Morgan's note, mentioning the name of the girl he loved and whom he had never expected to see again this side of eternity, had come like a benediction, like a kiss from Regina's lips, seeking him out in this canyon of despair.

"Wayne Morgan will not fail us, Senor Russ," Blue Hawk said gently. "And now, we must destroy his message. Standish is coming. We must not let our guard know that anything is out of the ordinary. You know the odds my *compadre* must face in coming into the canyon tonight, alone."

CHAPTER X

Over the Rimrock

STATIONED on the south rim of Thundergust Canyon where he could see the entire sweep of the gorge from the opening of Hogarth's railroad tunnel on the east to the outlaw's tent-dotted camp on the west, Wayne Morgan waited. For him the sun seemed to stand still in the sky. Nightfall was eight hours away, and until then he could only wait and watch. For Blue Hawk, the tension must be even more unbearable.

There had been times, during the three days he had spied on Hogarth's slave gang at work, that Morgan had almost despaired of letting Blue Hawk know of his presence on the rimrock. Making contact with his partner was vitally essential to any rescue attempt he might organize. Morgan had to know the enemy's strength, the way Hogarth deployed his guards at night.

Following Hogarth's slave-laden wagon up from the Antelope Creek landing on the Snake had been simple enough; the total distance covered was not more than forty miles. Hogarth, never dreaming that he was being followed, had made no effort to conceal his trail.

Entering Thundergust Canyon, however, was an impossibility for an outrider. Its mouth was barely wide enough to admit a wagon, and when Morgan had reached it, late in the afternoon, he had found it barred by a heavy log gate, securely padlocked.

The gate in itself posed no problem, but a wisp of tobacco smoke purling up from a nest of glacial rocks overlooking the canyon entrance had caught Morgan's alert eye and forewarned him of the presence of an armed guard. He had no doubt but that Hogarth kept a sentry on duty around the clock, to guard against any accidental visit from a prospector, timber cruiser, wolf trapper or other woodsman who might be exploring this vicinity.

Knowing that Hogarth's wagon had entered the canyon—which, so far as Morgan was concerned, had no name—he had chosen to flank Hogarth's road by the south rimrock. Before sundown he had come in view of Hogarth's camp, and had seen the outlaw's slave crew, numbering over forty men, slogging back from their labors upcanyon.

Among them, as Morgan had anticipated, was his Yaqui *compañero*. So far as

Morgan could tell, the Indian was in good physical shape.

The following day, from his hiding place, Morgan had seen Hogarth's guards march the prisoners off to another stint of labor. The bulk of the kidnaped laborers had disappeared into a tunnel mouth at the east end of the canyon, a mile from camp. A handful of workmen, including Blue Hawk, had been strung out at intervals along a roadbed which was being blazed eastward through the rocks and brush to meet the tunnel.

The almost level grade of the new road, and its long compound curves and arrow-straight stretches, together with the surveyor's stakes marking its course, told a significant story to Morgan. Hogarth was using his slave labor to build a portion of a railroad through this canyon.

Since Northern Overland was the only railroad being built across Idaho at this time, it seemed obvious that this tunnel would be where N. O. would cross the Thundergust on its way to Puget Sound.

That had been three days ago. Now he had contacted Blue Hawk, and had the information he needed before entering the canyon by night.

He had stashed Midnight and the other three ponies in the forest just outside the canyon gateway. From his packs he had brought back all the weapons which he and Blue Hawk carried, weapons which Captain Sampsill had left with their gear.

It was quite an arsenal. His own '73 model .44 Winchester saddle gun; the .30-30 which Blue Hawk carried in his saddle boot; the Masked Rider's matched six-guns, which he carried at his flanks now; the extra pair of .45 revolvers which bore Wayne Morgan's initials on the backstrap; the Remington .44 he had acquired at Falletti's place on the Snake River.

IN ADDITION, Morgan had brought along two forty-foot lariats and thirty feet of manila rope from his pack-horse. Knotted together, they would be long enough to enable him to lower himself over the cliffs.

In a gunnysack he carried ammunition for the two rifles and the five six-guns, and his army binoculars.

Shortly before sundown, a series of whistles was relayed from Hogarth's camp to the guards at the tunnel mouth. The nightly exodus back to camp began.

Bellied down on the south rim, well-hidden in a clump of wild grapevine, Morgan saw the armed guards flanking the long single file of jaded, work-worn shanghaied victims. Blue Hawk and the brawny young man with him fell into the procession as it passed the spot where they were working, not once looking up to the rim from which they knew Morgan was watching.

Dusk was filling Thundergust Canyon with indigo shadow when the slave laborers arrived at camp. Through his glasses, Morgan saw the men getting their food from the Chinese at the big cookfire.

He saw something else, which disturbed him. The two Shuttlers wagons had been hitched in tandem and were obviously getting ready to leave the canyon tonight, for ten mules had been hitched to the lead wagon.

On the incoming trip, only two mules had been spanned to the same Shuttlers. Four could have handled the tandem easily. The extra mules meant that a heavier cargo than ordinary would be coming back to this canyon.

And then the explanation flashed into Morgan's head. The *Columbia Queen* was due at Painted Post, loaded with Hogarth's dynamite and blasting powder, to be used for completing the railroad tunnel. Four tons of high explosives, if he remembered the conversation between Hogarth and Sampsill down at the Snake River landing explosives which the *Columbia Queen* had had ample time to take aboard at Pasco and transport back up the river.

As darkness closed in, Morgan focused his binoculars on the orange blurs marking the outlaws' campfire. He could see the fire shine on the dirty canvas hoods of the tandem-hitched Shuttlers.

Then he saw Hogarth's Gargantuan figure detach itself from one of the tents, head for a wagon, and climb aboard. A

stocktender handed him the lines. The mules plunged against the collars and the prairie schooners got under way, melting from Morgan's view as they lumbered outside the limited range of firelight.

Alarm needled Morgan. He had hoped to enter the camp later tonight and, taking advantage of Blue Hawk's tip that Hogarth slept in one of the wagons, capture the kingpin of the owlhooter bunch first.

With Hogarth as a hostage under his guns, Morgan had hoped for a quick surrender of the armed guards and an easy rescue of Blue Hawk and the two score prisoners. Now, with Hogarth outbound and probably not due back to Thundergust Canyon for two days, unforeseen problems arose. Among others, Hogarth might have the keys to his slave crew's shackles on his person.

Morgan did some fast thinking. He could cache his guns and ropes here on the south rim and, within an hour's time, reach his own remuda and ride in pursuit of Hogarth. Outflanking the slow-moving wagons would be easy, even at night.

The advantage of surprise would be in Morgan's favor. He believed he could effect a capture of Dexter Hogarth somewhere along the wagon road leading to the Snake River landing, without difficulty, and without particular risk to himself.

Then, thinking the thing through, Morgan changed his mind.

"He won't have the slaves' keys with him," he muttered. "It'll take him all night and half of tomorrow to reach Painted Post, and it'll be another half-day before Sampsill's boat shows up. Then an all-night trip back here, and lucky if he makes it to the canyon by noon day after tomorrow. That would mean keeping his crew locked up for almost two working days. No, he's left the keys with a subordinate."

MORGAN waited until the campfires had died down. From previous scouting he knew that Hogarth's guards and their slaves turned in early, against a dawn rising hour.

Knotting his ropes together securely, Morgan tied one of his lariats to a thick-boled Douglas fir on the canyon's edge, and dropped the coiled rope out into space. He had chosen this spot carefully, knowing his combined ropes would reach the cliff bottom with a few feet to spare.

That done, Morgan lashed his weapons into a bundle and slung them over his shoulder with a sling he had made out of pigging strings. Then, gripping the rope securely, he swung his chap-clad legs over the granite rim and began his hand-over-hand descent into Thundergust Canyon.

Twisting the rope around one leg to act as a brake, in case he needed to rest en route to the bottom, Wayne Morgan made the descent. In minutes he was standing on the talus shelf at the base of the scarp.

From here on, it would not be so easy. There would be no escape by way of this dangling rope. The open end of the canyon was under armed guard. The opposite end, where the tunnel was, could not be scaled by human beings, or even a bighorn goat, for the cliff which boxed in the gorge on the east overhung its base. And, so far as Morgan knew, Hogarth's railroad tunnel had not quite pierced the granite backbone of the mountain range.

He made his way down to the graded roadbed and turned west, walking slowly, gun in hand. This stage of his adventure was not particularly dangerous, for Hogarth's defenses against surprise discovery or attack had been predicated on an entry through the canyon gate, westward of the camp.

It was velvety black down here in the canyon bottom. The nameless creek which sluiced through the gorge from its subterranean source back in the Thundergust Mountains filled the night with secretive whisperings. The murmuring noise of the water, the croaking of bullfrogs and the sough of a night wind in the Idaho pines furring the rimrocks, covered up the sound of his cowboots grating in the rubble.

Blue Hawk had warned him that a guard patrolled the camp at night. The Yaqui's note had been emphatic in saying that this guard would be Morgan's great-

est obstacle to entering the sleeping outlaw camp.

As Morgan drew nearer the dimly seen tents, he could make out the ruby coals of the campfires glowing feebly in the night. Down by the creek, picketed saddle horses were cropping grass. The wind was in Morgan's face, which was good. The horses would not pick up his scent and trumpet an alarm. And Blue Hawk's message had said there were no watch dogs at the encampment.

The odor of woodsmoke was in Morgan's nostrils now. He was close enough to the tents to hear the chorus of snores from exhausted sleepers. But Blue Hawk would be wide awake.

Then Morgan halted stockstill as he heard the measured tread of boots. He unslung his bundle of firearms and hunkered down to avoid the danger of silhouetting himself against the star-powdered sky above the canyon walls.

A black shape momentarily blotted out the smoldering fires. Morgan had located the guard on duty. Hogarth's purpose in keeping a sentry patrolling the camp, of course, was not so much to guard against attack from without, as to make sure that no escape plot was hatched up by the prisoners some night.

CHAPTER XI

Guns In The Night

NOT a dozen feet in front of Wayne Morgan, the sentinel came to a halt. For an instant, Morgan wondered if he had been spotted, and he braced himself to charge, thumb on gunhammer.

Then he could tell by the dimly seen movements of the guard that the man was rolling a cigarette. A match would burst into flame in a few moments, and that could be disastrous.

With infinite stealth, Morgan began inching his way toward the unsuspecting guard. The starlight was strong enough for him to see the man's outline. A shotgun was leaning against the fellow's hip as he rolled and licked his quirly.

Then the man was plumbing his pocket for a match. Morgan came to his feet, still ten feet away from the guard. A loose stone grated under his boot and instantly the guard stiffened. A half-whisper, half-growl came:

"That you, Standish? Relieving me an hour early, ain't you?"

Morgan knew he had been seen now. He answered with a non-committal grunt and moved forward swiftly—just as the guard wiped a match alight and held it to his cigarette.

Momentarily blinded, nevertheless the guard got his close look at the stranger who came charging in with a six-gun lifted for a clubbing stroke at his skull. The guard ducked instinctively and Morgan's blow, intended to drop the man without sound, grazed off the shaggy skull.

With a grunt of alarm, the guard made a grab for Morgan, ignoring his shotgun, which clattered to the ground.

Charging in, Morgan felt his gun hand seized at the wrist, preventing him from knocking the man out. But he got his left arm around the guard's throat, throttling any yell which would have aroused the sleeping camp.

They went down in a grapple, rolling into the darkness as the ground dropped away toward the creek. There was no stopping that toboggan slide down the steep-tilted declivity. Morgan concentrated on maintaining his strangle-hold on the beefy guard's throat.

The struggling pair hit the creek with a geysering splash and ice water closed over them. Instinctively Morgan had sucked his lungs full of air, giving him that much advantage as, rearing to their feet in knee-deep water, their struggles carried them out into the deep part of the creek.

Their boots stumbled on slippery rocks underfoot and for a second time they went under. The foaming ripples smoothed out, and only the bullfrogs in the tules knew of the death struggle going on under the

glassy black surface of the creek.

At last one dripping shape emerged from the nameless creek and clawed a way up onto the bank. The frogs were hushed now.

Gasping air into his lungs, Wayne Morgan realized how close he had been to drowning, down there on the slimy creek bottom. Even after he had felt his adversary go limp, he had had difficulty in disengaging himself from the drowned outlaw's spikelike fingers.

He jacked open the six-gun he had clung to throughout that grim, minute-long struggle under water, blew water out of the bore, removed the cartridges and wiped them carefully on dead grass. Then he removed his cowboots, emptied the water from them, and tugged them back on.

The guard was disposed of. The camp was open to him now. Crawling back up the creek bank, Morgan found himself behind the easternmost of the row of tents. According to Blue Hawk's note, his tent was the third from the end, counting from the tunnel end of the canyon.

Morgan made his way along behind the tents, careful to avoid the pegs and taut ropes leading to them. When he gained the rear of Blue Hawk's tent he cut in through the alley between tents until he reached the open end of the canvas Sibley.

A chorus of snors told him that the inmates of the tent were asleep, or feigning sleep. He crept inside and, quiet though he was, heard a body shift on the cot nearest his right hand, and heard Blue Hawk's faint whisper:

"The guard is asleep at your left, Senor."

Morgan stepped over to the nearest cot, the one immediately to the left of the open end of the tent.

ENOUGH star shine filtered through the opening to reveal the shape of sleeping guard there. Morgan lifted his Colt .45 and rapped the outlaw across the skull, careful not to inflict a dangerous wound. The tap of steel on bone was an effective anesthetic. Another guard would cause no trouble tonight. Instantly, Blue Hawk sat up in his blankets and swung his legs over the edge of the cot. A chain jangled to the movement of the Indian's leg.

In the darkness, Morgan's hand groped for and met the Yaqui's. In the adjoining cot, Morgan heard the swift breathing of a wide-awake man. That must be Blue Hawk's work mate, the only other prisoner in camp who knew of tonight's drama in the making.

"We are all chained to the big log on the floor of the tent, Senor," Blue Hawk whispered. "The keys are usually in the keeping of Hogarth, but he has left with the wagons."

"I know," whispered Morgan. "Any idea if the guard on patrol duty had them? If so, I'll have to fish him out of the creek."

Blue Hawk whispered sibilantly in the darkness, "Luck is with us tonight, Senor. The keys are with a guard named Luke Standish. You will find him sleeping on a tarp over by the cookfire."

Morgan gripped his Indian partner's hand, then slipped out of the tent. Twenty feet away, he saw the blanketed shape of a sleeping Luke Standish, near the campfire. Remembering the name the night guard had spoken to him, he realized that Standish was scheduled to be next on guard duty.

Morgan made his way over to the sleeper and hunkered down. A Springfield rifle was lying handy to Standish's bedroll. Morgan moved it to one side. Then, gripping his own Colt with his right hand, he reached down with his left and shook Standish's shoulder.

The man came awake with a series of snorting sounds and reared up in his blankets. Stupid with sleep, he growled churlishly, "All right, Kelly, all right. Sorry I overslept."

Standish came to his feet, Morgan standing with him. An instant later all sleep was banished from the burly guard as he felt the muzzle of a Colt six-gun ream his belly.

"Don't make a sound, Standish, or I'll blow your guts from here to next Thurs-

day!" Morgan threatened.

Standish sucked in a breath of dismay. Before he could speak, Morgan went on, "I want the keys to the workers' leg irons. Remember, one yell out of you and it'll be your last!"

A coal popped in the nearby campfire and a flame leaped up momentarily, giving Standish a view of his captor's hard-set jaw and glinting eyes. Morgan was a

ed desperately. "I ain't going to cause any trouble. Who are yuh—the law?"

Morgan made no answer until Standish had halted in front of Blue Hawk's tent. Feverish excitement was waiting them there now. The other prisoners had been awakened.

"Unlock the Indian's fetters first," Morgan whispered. "The rest of you men, keep quiet. If the other guards catch on some-

HOW BAD WAS THE OLD-TIME COWBOY?

A REPORTER for a cattlemen's magazine recently became interested in the question of how hard-boiled the old-time cowboy actually was. He selected the first fifty old-time trail drivers and working cowboys he could find in Southwest Texas, and interviewed them. Out of the fifty, all of whom wore guns as part of their working clothes, only one of them had committed a murder, one had shot a man to death in self-defense, and a third had put a bullet through a cattle rustler, but the rustler had lived to be killed by another cattleman later.

Thus only three out of fifty cowpokes had ever shot another man. None of the rest had ever even fired a gun at another human being. The reporter used this piece of research to prove that the cowboy wasn't as handy with his shooting iron as he is pictured in Western stories.

However, the reporter's own figures proved that six out of every hundred cowboys, or one out of every sixteen or seventeen of them *had* used his gun on another man.

If you want to compare that percentage with the percentage of men of today who have drawn guns on other men—exclusive of soldiers and law officers—you still have to admit that the old-time professional cowboy must have settled quite a lot of disagreements with old Judge Colt.

And when you add to this number the killings in the border towns, and the Western night life killings committed by frontier men who never bothered to work for a living, you really come up with a considerable amount of gunplay—no matter whose statistics you use!

—Allan K. Echols

total stranger to that guard and it was enough to convince Standish that disaster had come to Hogarth's camp.

"I'll turn over the keys, bucko," he muttered.

Standish reached in a hip pocket of his levis and drew forth a ring of keys, which jingled musically as Standish's shaking hand passed them over to Morgan.

"Now, walk ahead of me," Morgan whispered. "Over to the tent where Blue Hawk, the Indian, is bunking."

Standish, in his sock feet, lifted his hands before the threat of the stranger's leveled gun and began stumbling toward Blue Hawk's tent.

"Hold your fire, bucko," Standish panted desperately. "I ain't going to cause any trouble. Who are yuh—the law?"

Morgan made no answer until Standish had halted in front of Blue Hawk's tent. Feverish excitement was waiting them there now. The other prisoners had been awakened.

"Unlock the Indian's fetters first," Morgan whispered. "The rest of you men, keep quiet. If the other guards catch on something is amiss there'll be hell to pay in this camp."

Standish said in a hoarse whisper, "I'll have to strike a match."

Morgan reached for the tent flies which had been slung back over the roof of the tent for ventilation on this humid night, and closed them to kep a light from showing outside. Standish got a match going, and Morgan got his first glimpse of Blue Hawk and his tent mates. One of them he recognized as a man off the *Columbia Queen,* yellow-mustached Jake Ambrose.

STANDISH, down on his knees, sorted through the keys and soon had Blue Hawk's ankle iron unlocked. As the

Yaqui stood up, Morgan handed him his extra six-gun.

The grinning young man who occupied the bed next to Blue Hawk's whispered excitedly, "I'm Russ Leedom, Morgan. To me, you look like an angel of mercy!"

A glad smile broke the gravity of Morgan's face as he took the keys from Standish's fist and turned the guard over to Blue Hawk's custody.

"Regina was fine when I left her, Leedom," Morgan said, testing keys on Leedom's leg chains until he found the proper one. You'll be with your sweetheart *muy pronto.*"

Working with the utmost quiet, Morgan went the rounds of the five slave workers in Blue Hawk's tent, releasing each one in turn. Then he made a quick examination of the guard he had knocked out, satisfied himself that the man would not regain consciousness within the hour, and then, striking another match, turned to face Luke Standish.

"Here's my plan, Standish," Wayne Morgan whispered crisply. "I know there's a guard in each of the tents, just like in this one. We're going out by the cookfire and you're going to sound the alarm. That'll bring all your cronies busting out of the tents to see what's up."

Russ Leedom said quickly, "They'll all be toting guns, Morgan."

Morgan laughed softly. "They won't get to use 'em. I've got weapons for each of you men. If any guard tries to make a break, or opens fire, Standish here knows he'll be the first to die."

Ordering Blue Hawk to stand guard over the prisoner, Wayne Morgan ducked out of the tent and hurried to the outskirts of the camp where he had left his bundle of firearms. Returning, he handed Russ Leedom the '73 Winchester, Blue Hawk's .30-30 to Jake Ambrose, and the six-guns to the remaining slave victims.

Morgan led them out of the tent then and spent a few minutes deploying them in the darkness beyond the smoldering campfire, Blue Hawk with the others. Morgan remained alongside the fire with the trembling Standish.

"All right—rouse your crew, Standish," Morgan ordered. "And remember—your own life depends on how you handle those buckos. I'll have you covered as of right now."

Luke Standish cleared his throat, cupped his hands over his mouth, and gave out with a stentorian bellow which sent echoes clamoring along the dark reaches of Thundergust Canyon:

"Everybody out! Hustle it, men! Everybody out!"

Instantly a clamor went through the camp. Guards, lifted from sleep by the chief guard's shout, came stumbling out of their respective tents, staring around dazedly.

"Over here—by the cookfire!" Standish shouted. "Hurry it up, you rapscallions —we got trouble."

The guards assembled like soldiers on the double, routed by a bugle call in the night.

They all saw Standish and another man standing by the glowing campfire and each assumed the man with Standish was Kelly, the night guard.

When Morgan was sure all the guards were on hand, he walked over to pick up a pile of dry brush which the Chinese cook had on hand for his breakfast kindling. The guards were jabbering excitedly, wanting an explanation for this unprecedented night call, when Morgan suddenly threw the brush on the glowing coals.

As the blaze leaped up, revealing the half-dressed guards, Morgan lifted his hand in a beckoning signal. Blue Hawk, Russ Leedom, and their armed comrades came swiftly into the firelight glow, behind leveled guns.

"Lift your hands, men!" Standish jabbered frantically. "We're trapped, the lot of us! Drop your guns pronto and elevate!"

The surprise was devastatingly complete. Without a shot being fired, the rout of the hostile camp was consummated. To the tent guards, summoned so rudely from sleep, the whole scene had a nightmarish quality of unreality about it.

CHAPTER XII

Retribution

WHEN, an hour later, Leedom and Blue Hawk had finished the happy task of freeing the remaining prisoners, and their guards had been herded into one of the tents, Wayne Morgan had a brief council of war with Russ Leedom and his Indian partner. He wanted to know about the guard on duty at the canyon gate.

When the talk was finished, Leedom called in all the prisoners except the five commanded by Jake Ambrose, who formed a cordon of leveled guns around the jail tent housing their erstwhile guards.

"Which one of you men is Bolderbuck, the surveyor?" Wayne Morgan inquired.

Bolderbuck stepped forward into the dancing firelight.

"I've been talking with Leedom here," Morgan said. "Blue Hawk, Leedom and I are riding out of Thundergust Canyon tonight to take care of Dexter Hogarth. I want to leave you in charge of the camp, Bolderbuck."

The railroad surveyor said huskily, "At daylight, sir, every one of us will want to light out of here as fast as we can go. We never expected to leave."

Morgan grinned. "You've put a lot of hard work in on that railroad tunnel of Hogarth's," he said, "and I think you deserve to reap the rewards of that labor. As soon as I get out to civilization I intend to dispatch a U. S. marshal to this canyon to take care of Hogarth's crew. In the meantime, think this over—the Northern Overland Railroad can use this short-cut. They'll pay a fancy price for that tunnel you men built. I suggest you organize yourselves into a sort of corporation to sell that tunnel to Northern Overland. Doesn't that sound feasible, Bolderbuck?"

Moisture glistened in the railroad surveyor's eyes.

"Stranger," he said huskily, on the verge of an emotional breakdown, "that proposition listens mighty good to me. I I know what that tunnel would be worth to the railroad I worked for. A cool million, anyway. The only hitch is that Dexter Hogarth owns the ground."

Morgan hitched up his gun-belts. "Hogarth," he said meaningfully, "will be dead this time tomorrow. He knows if we capture him alive he'll go to the gallows, so I don't think we'll capture him alive. Take my advice, men, and stick it out here in the canyon a few days longer . . . . "

Sunset of the following day paved the glistening ripples of the Snake River with gold and crimson. From the dense underbrush on the west slope of Antelope Creek, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were crouched in hiding.

They had encountered no difficulty in riding out of Thundergust Canyon. The Chinese cook who had been supposed to be on guard duty at the log gate had apparently heard Standish's shout of alarm from the camp and had departed his post of duty in great haste, guessing that disaster had overtaken Hogarth's men.

Early this morning, when the Masked Rider had still been in his rôle of Wayne Morgan, wandering waddy, he and Blue Hawk had said good-by to young Russ Leedom.

Leedom had headed overland on foot to Bigpine, with two objectives in view. Immediately upon reaching the settlement, he was to notify an officer of the law to ride out to Thundergust Canyon with a posse and take charge of Dexter Hogarth's outlaw crew. With that duty discharged, Leedom was going to board a river steamer which would in due time put him ashore at Falletti's Landing for his long-delayed reunion with the girl he loved.

Morgan and Blue Hawk, riding on toward Antelope Creek, had reached this spot where they were now halted in mid-afternoon. As they had expected, Dexter Hogarth was waiting at the Painted Post landing with his tandem-hitched Shuttlers wagons.

The two riders in the cause of justice had been content to hide out in the brush, making no attempt to bring Hogarth to bay. At this stage of the game there was no hurry. Hogarth was waiting for Captain Esau Sampsill to show up with the dynamite cargo.

So Wayne Morgan had leisurely changed over to the black regalia of the Masked Rider. And in the shelter of the brush not fifty yards from where Hogarth had parked his freight wagons, the masked man and the Yaqui had taken turns sleeping through the remainder of the afternoon.

NOW, as dusk began creeping up the western footslopes of the Thundergust range, to their ears came the remote *whoooo* of a steamboat's whistle, from downstream.

At four o'clock, another steamer had passed the mouth of Antelope Creek, headed downstream. She was the sidewheeler *Sacajawea*, and the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had seen young Russ Leedom at the railing as she passed.

It would be their last glimpse of young Leedom, much as they would have liked to have witnesesd the young man's reunion with Regina Falletti.

The steamer's whistle roused Dexter Hogarth to begin hitching his mule team to the lead wagon. By the time he had finished, the *Columbia Queen* hove into view and nosed up to the painted mooringing spar outside the mouth of Antelope Creek.

Hogarth went wading out into the shallows as he caught sight of his outlaw partner, Esau Sampsill, emerging from his pilot-house to wave from the texas deck. Up forward, Bosko, the mate, and his deck hands were busy lowering a wide cleated gangplank.

The foredeck of *Columbia Queen* was crowded with crates and kegs, their red labels visible from shore:

DANGER—HIGH EXPLOSIVES

HANDLE WITH CARE

"No need to wait for dark to unload this freight, Hogarth!" Sampsill boomed from the riverboat's deck. "Perfectly legal and aboveboard. I told the wholesaler at Pasco it was for minin' purposes. Who'll be the wiser?"

The gangplank was down, and Sampsill's burly crew began shouldering boxes of dynamite and bringing them ashore to stow in Hogarth's freight wagons.

With the coming of darkness the job was only half completed, and Hogarth went aboard to help Sampsill set out a string of ship lamps to work by.

"Watch them lanterns!" Sampsill bawled a warning to Bosko. "Don't forget the kind of cargo we're shipping!"

Dexter Hogarth and Esau Sampsill mounted to the texas deck to watch the freight unloading. Out in the black shadows alongside the wagons, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk patiently bided their time. Bolderbuck would need Hogarth's shipment of explosives to finish off the Thundergust Canyon tunnel. Before leaving the outlaw camp, Morgan had left instructions for Bolderbuck to send a wagoneer out of the hills to pick up the loaded wagons which would be waiting for him here.

At length the situation for which the Masked Rider had been waiting developed. Hogarth and Sampsill were standing on the *Columbia Queen's* texas deck; Bosko, tallying the freight, was on the foredeck by the gangplank. The members of their crew were either ashore, loading the wagons, or wading in the water, loaded with kegs of blasting powder.

"All right," the Masked Rider said quietly to the Indian who sat his gray mount alongside the masked man's big black. This is the pay-off."

Stirrup by stirrup, the two spurred out into the open, down onto the spit of sand alongside of the creek. They ignored the freight hands. All of them were stripped to the waist and were not carrying firearms.

Pointing his Winchester .44 toward the sky, the Masked Rider squeezed trigger.

At the deafening report of the rifle,

Esau Sampsill and Dexter Hogarth spun around and faced the shore. In the blinding lamplight of the deck, their shocked expressions were plainly visible.

The brilliant light reached the Snake River bank as well, revealing the two dramatic figures on horseback there.

Esau Sampsill was the first to react.

"The Masked Rider!" The steamer captain's shout echoed through the night.

"He gave me the slip at Falletti's!"

With a choked oath, the riverboat renegade clawed a six-gun from his belt and opened fire. His first bullet hit the sand at Midnight's feet; his second whined over the Robin Hood outlaw's head.

SLOWLY, deliberately, the black-clad outlaw on the magnificent black stallion raised his Winchester to his shoulder and lined his sights on the boat captain. He muttered through the corner of his mouth:

"You take care of Hogarth, Hawk. He's your meat."

Dexter Hogarth had snapped out of his trance now, recognizing Blue Hawk as an escaped prisoner from his Thundergust Canyon camp.

Sampsill and Hogarth both were triggering their guns as the Masked Rider squeezed off his shot. The stunned deck hands around the wagons saw their skipper buckle in the middle and topple forward to hang over the texas railing of the *Columbia Queen*. The Masked Rider's unerring bullet had pierced his skull.

Hogarth's gun was empty, and he started running for shelter, like a caged animal. Blue Hawk's leveled .30-30 was following the slave masted. A split instant before Hogarth could dive into the shelter of the wheel-house, the Indian fired.

Blue Hawk's slug knocked Hogarth to his knees, mortally wounded. And at that moment, Sampsill's corpse toppled over the railing where it had been balanced. It knocked a ship's lantern off its stanchion bracket. Crashing to the deck, the spilled oil was ignited and ran in a blazing puddle toward where Bosko had taken shelter amid the dubious sanctuary

WHERE DID IT HAPPEN?

A quiz by JOSEPH C. STACEY

Listed below (in jumbled fashion) are 9 memorable events in the history of the West, and the cities-and/or-states in which they occurred. See if you can match up at least 6 correctly for a passing score; 7-8 is excellent; 9 perfect.

1. General Custer and his men are massacred by Sitting Bull.
2. Gold is discovered in 1848, and the "rush" is on.
3. Bob Ford kills Jesse James.
4. The Dalton gang is wiped out after trying to raid two banks at the same time.
5. The Alamo falls to General Santa Anna.
6. Wild Bill Hickok is shot in the back by Jack McCall.
7. Sheriff Henry Plummer is hanged as leader of outlaw band (by vigilantes).
8. Billy the Kid is shot dead by Sheriff Pat Garrett.
9. Pancho Villa crosses the Mexican border and raids U.S. town.

(a) COLUMBUS, NEW MEXICO
(b) DEADWOOD CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA
(c) BANNACK CITY, MONTANA
(d) LINCOLN, NEW MEXICO
(e) LITTLE BIG HORN, MONTANA
(f) ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI
(g) SUTTER'S MILL, CALIFORNIA
(h) SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS
(i) COFFEYVILLE, KANSAS

ANSWERS

1-e, 2-g, 3-f, 4-i, 5-h, 6-b, 7-c, 8-d, 9-a.

of the unloaded explosives.

The mate screamed with horror, but there was no time for him to leap overboard. The crawling flames must have found a damaged crate of dynamite, or a powder keg with a leaking bung-hole.

One instant, the stern-wheeler was tugging at its moorings; the next, a red volcano had erupted on its foredeck and the riverboat staggered to a concussion that seemed to shiver the earth to its very core.

Blast followed blast with deafening rapidity. A lighted lantern went kiting up into the night sky like a shooting star, finally ending its parabola in the rocks on the opposite bank of the Snake.

A miniature tidal wave came rushing into Antelope Creek canyon, lapping against the locked wheels of Hogarth's wagons, surging around the hoofs of the panicked mule team.

The night sky was raining debris. The *Columbia Queen*, shattered into shapeless wreckage, had settled to the bottom of the river. Its superstructure and that part of the splintered hull above waterline was enveloped in leaping flames. By morning, only the battered smokestacks and a few charred timbers would be visible above the water's surface.

A mangled form that had been Dexter Hogarth was lodged forty feet above ground in the crotch of a hemlock tree. The round-about scene was obscure in the billowing shrouds of ugly smoke. For minutes afterward, it seemed, the echoes of the recurrent explosions rumbled across the conifer-clad hills toward Idaho.

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk put their horses back into the shelter of the trees. The *Columbia Queen's* crew did not interest them; those men had vanished up the ravine. Hogarth's mules would be waiting when Bolderbuck's driver arrived tomorrow morning from Thundergust Canyon. The brakes which locked the wheels of the heavily-loaded Shuttlers guaranteed that. . . .

Eight months later, Wayne Morgan called for his mail at an obscure postoffice in Arizona Territory. It was then that he learned the happy sequel to their Snake River interlude. The letter was postmarked Walla Walla, Washington Territory. It bore the return address of Mr. and Mrs. Russel J. Leedom.

Morgan read the letter to Blue Hawk, out at their desert camp.

It was written in Regina's delicate hand, and contained news which came as a rich reward to the Robin Hood outlaw and his Yaqui comrade who had made the girl's happiness possible:

We were of course disappointed that you could not attend our wedding, Mr. Morgan. My stepfather's death did not put a cloud on our happiness, for as Russ probably told you, it was Von Falletti who sold him into bondage that night to Captain Sampsill.

Russ owns a prosperous mercantile store here in Walla Walla now. His share of the money which the Northern Overland Railway paid Hogarth's "slaves" for Bolderbuck Tunnel through Thundergust Canyon paid for the store and has given us a nest-egg for the education of our child.

Yes, we are expecting a baby. If he is a boy, well, we'll name him Wayne: if a girl, Regina Morgan Leedom. The next time you are back in Washington Territory, drop in and find out which it was.

Your loving friends,
Regina and Russ

● ● ●

Next Issue:

Another rough, tough Wayne Morgan novel

THE SPANISH SPUR

By DEAN OWEN

Plus Many Other Stories and Features!

Lady IN THE HOOSEGOW

By H. MATHIEU TRUESDELL

The rider climbed the Rio Bravo shore

Lance had escaped from jail, but now, because she'd helped him crack out—they had his sweetheart there!

MESTINO was a haven for the trail-weary and the hard pressed. In Mestino, a man could buy himself a drink and a bite of good food and some carry-rations for his saddlebags; he could buy cartridges for his hip-guns and his carbine and a clean change of clothing and a horse with a brand so altered no former owner

could possibly swear to having owned it.

There were no sleeping quarters for the passer-through at Mestino Post. A man bought what he wanted or needed and he straddled his mount and rode on. The lone citizen of Mestino didn't appreciate having to dispose of corpses, so he disposed, instead, of possible ones. He tried to force violent death to by-pass his trading-post; Mestino earth was sun-baked and hard packed.

So a man rested as he ate and drank and gathered his provisions. Then he rode on across the river and found himself a spot to spread his bedroll. He killed or got himself killed beyond the dab of land known as Mestino.

Mestino had no need of law. It was neutral ground, and when the Law came to Mestino Post, it was merely to pass through. It was neither obstructed nor aided. Mestino, an island washed by the wide and shallow Rio Bravo, was within view of three counties in two different states; but Mestino Post owed allegiance to no incorporated authority. It was a spot of land surveyors forgot.

Lance Derrick, like the others who chose to ford the deepest spot along the Rio Bravo and ignore the bridge upstream and the ferry down the river, was on a trail with death. He had no desire to kill; he hoped he wouldn't be killed. He only knew he had to ride the trail and take what cards fate dealt to him.

South of the Border word had come to the ears of Lance Derrick; a whisper of the leaves along that invisible grapevine which mysteriously spreads news to the furthest reaches of the land of men with a gunsmoke past.

In the jail at Red Rock, the same jail from which Lance Derrick had escaped almost three months ago, was a new prisoner, duly tried and convicted, said the rustling leaves, for aiding the escape of the convicted Lance Derrick. A year and a day at hard labor, so went the message of the grapevine, faced Dee Franks.

"Anything new from over Red Rock way?" Lance asked at the bar.

He was the only patron of Mestino Post, resting through the heat of the day rather than swap his game Roddy horse for an unknown and probably unorthodoxically acquired mount. It was a reluctant wait but a necessary one. Riding roughshod into Red Rock wasn't going to help Dee Franks and it could do Lance Derrick a lot of harm.

"You'll be wanting to know about the gal", the one-eyed post owner said without looking directly at Lance Derrick. "You're a fool, Derrick! Sure, Sheriff Niles locked up Dee Franks and had her tried and convicted and everything for breaking you out of his Red Rock jail. But it was just so the word could get to you.

"He knowed you'd come blundering back, just like you're doing, and ram your fool neck into the noose he's got waiting for you—or get yourself killed dodging it. Take a pipeful of advice, which I give to few, and ride back below the Border and let the gal serve her time. A year from today she can join you down there."

After a moment, when Lance said nothing, the one-eyed man continued: "Niles'll be looking for you to come in through Mestino, and there'll be posse guns on the other bank of the Rio Bravo. If you beat them, there's others between you and Dee Franks; and if they catch you alive, there's that noose waiting. Play poker, and you and the gal'll be together next fall. Don't, and she'll come out of prison all alone and branded in a heartless world. But it ain't my business, neither way. A rider's coming in, and is he in a hurry!"

LANCE half turned about, deep in thought, and squinted against the westering sun. The horse was splashing through the Rio Bravo, kicking water, the man in the saddle was twisted around to view the shore behind him. They climbed ashore a hundred yards away, and the horseman urged his weary mount to the long building which served as a combination barroom, general store, and livery office—Mestino Post.

"Stranger to me," the one-eyed hombre

muttered. "Nobody I mind seeing hereabouts before."

The rider slid from leather dragging his saddle gun from the scabbard. He came into the establishment and swept the room with his gaze.

"Hell is going to move in here by the bushel in about a quarter of an hour," he announced in clipped tones.

"Then you got exactly fourteen minutes to swap saddles and cross the other fork of the Rio Bravo," the one-eyed barman told him. "Take any horse in that long lean-to, except the black with the blaze face. There won't be no fighting in Mestino."

The stranger looked at him for a long moment, then his gaze swung to Lance Derrick and back again. "I can't go on," he stated. "They put a slug through my shoulder muscle and it—"

"There's a sheriff's posse on the other side." The post owner pointed. "Do your fighting over there."

"I wouldn't have a chance on those flats against a good marksman with a rifle, even if I took my own horse and didn't waste time making a fresh choice and switching saddles. I'm making a stand here, and if anything gets damaged, you can send a bill of particulars to the federal government."

Cradling the long-gun in the bend of his left arm, the stranger palmed a silver shield of office and added, "I'm Johnny Sheldon, deputy U. S. marshal. The men on my back-trail are a wild bunch led by two of the Jerabek brothers, Fred and Lew. I sent Allen Jerabek hellwards two days back after he tried to rob the post office at Danton."

The one-eyed post owner doffed his apron, folded it carefully, and placed it on a shelf below the back-bar mirror. He took a steeple-crowned Mexican style hat from a peg and slapped it on his head.

"I'll move your crowbait to shelter," he told the lawman. "If I don't happen to get back before the party starts, just find yourself a sheet of paper and sign it so's I can get paid for damages. You might not be on tap to attend to that after the ball," he added as he left.

Sheldon was forced to smile. He shuttered and barred the front windows on one side and was crossing to those on the other side of the door, when he paused to cast a glance at the tall, dusty man who was standing at the bar.

"You'd better get out from under, mister," the lawman suggested. "In fact, it might help both of us if you would ride over and ask that sheriff's posse the barkeep was speaking of to come and pull this wild bunch off of my neck. There's at least a half dozen of those gun-dogs, and they're plenty eager to lift my hair."

Lance Derrick shook his head slowly. "I'll just hang and rattle if you don't mind, Marshal. Chances are your wild bunch won't even ride into Mestino. This is a sort of city of refuge, and law and outlaw both respect it thataway, like the one-eyed gent told you."

The badge toter finished barring the windows and the door in back of the bar. "There's a first time for everything," he stated flatly.

Lance poured himself a long drink and carried it to a corner table in sight of the open front door, but out of range. He didn't expect trouble, but in case there was any, he didn't want to get shot up by mistake. He had heard of the Jerabecks and was pretty certain the hardcase bunch would respect the neutrality of Mestino.

Maybe he should have followed the one-eyed hombre to shelter at the barn or at the boathouse, but Lance Derrick was always making foolish choices. He was a fool, as the trader had told him. If he hadn't been a hot-headed fool, Dee Franks wouldn't be in her present predicament.

DELIA FRANKS had come west to try to force some book learning into the skulls of the youngsters around Red Rock; and Lance Derrick, like many another young cow-prod, had showered attention upon her. He didn't have too much time for courting the pretty schoolteacher, what with the quarter section he was trying to prove up on and hanging onto his regular job with the Rocking G.

After he acquired title to his own little spread, Lance had intended to ask Dee Franks to marry him: but now—

Lance had worked for the Gans boys a long time and had never suspected that one of them was the mysterious marauder who had burned his feed, shot his prime bull, and cut and carried off thousands of feet of his drift fence at various times. But he had ridden into his homestead late one evening to catch Swinney Gans while he was attempting to set the recently completed cabin afire.

Youngest of the three Gans boys, Swinney had early been rejected as a suitor by Dee Franks. He often made snide remarks about the school mistress in Lance's presence but in a joking way that a man could ignore or laugh off.

Lance had taken time to smother the flames before riding back to the home ranch. According to his mother and his brothers, Swinney hadn't been home since early in the day, so Lance mounted and rode for Red Rock, after swearing loudly that he'd lick Swinney Gans within an inch of his life when he found him. Fulton and Philip Gans had made no move to stop the angered puncher.

Lance hadn't found Swinney Gans in town. No one in Red Rock had seen any of the Rocking G crew that day. Lance spent that night combing the range for him but in vain.

It was around noon of the next day that Sheriff Niles' posse had encircled Lance with cocked guns and ordered him to surrender. Swinney Gans had been brought into Red Rock early that morning by his brothers, lashed across his saddle. A single rifle slug had drilled him.

The fact that Lance's saddle scabbard was empty was only the more damning. His long-gun had been found concealed beneath bedding at the fire-damaged homestead cabin. It had been fired twice, and one empty shell remained in the receiver. A second shell case of like make and calibre had been found near a patch of undergrowth not far from the Rocking G line cabin where Swinney had been back-shot.

Dee Franks had proved her love for Lance Derrick the third night of his imprisonment in the Red Rock jail. Farm-reared back East, the little school teacher had harnessed a team and used them to pull the barred frame from Lance's cell window. Roddy, his horse, had been waiting, and Dee Franks had pressed all her meager savings into his palm as the aroused jailer stormed around the corner of the building.

Three months had passed before word reached Lance as to the fate of Dee Franks, and when he heard, he had started back at once.

It was ironic, he was thinking now, that he and the marshal should be taking refuge in Mestino while on each bank of the Rio Bravo waited a pair of brothers seeking vengeance for a third who had been slain.

But the Jerabecks weren't waiting!

"Duck, cowboy!" the marshal yelled from his position behind the bar, facing the open front door. "Here they come—seven of 'em!"

Sheldon fired, levered a fresh cartridge into the chamber of the carbine, and squeezed trigger again, bracing the saddle-gun along the bartop.

"Drilled one dead center," the lawman reported, "and knocked another one clean out of the saddle. He'll probably drown. The others scattered right and left and they'll no doubt ride in on us from our blind side now."

Lance got to his feet and checked the Colt at his right hip. "Looks like I misjudged the Jerabecks," he admitted.

He was thinking that if the Jerabecks could ride into Mestino for a man, thus violating the custom that set the island apart, then so could the Gans boys. When the posses beyond the west bank of the river heard the firing, it might move in to have a look-see, and two men might die in Mestino post—law and outlaw.

"Neither one of the fellows I tallied were Jerabecks," Sheldon announced. "This cracks up to be a long fight. Here's hoping that posse'll hear the shooting—"

"Don't talk so much," Lance snapped.

He didn't want to think of the possibility of Sheriff Niles' posse riding across the Bravo. He took a box of .45 shells from a shelf and helped himself to a spare pistol. "Looks like we're in this together, whether I want to be or not. Those hombres must've loved their brother mighty much to bust the code of Mestino."

"It's more than vengeance," Sheldon admitted. "Those Jerabecks are respected citizens up Denver way, and keep their loot stashed in a bank there like proper businessmen, using the name of Beck. Allen Jerabeck was the oldest and he was carrying all their legal papers. I've got the key to nigh onto a million dollars tucked in this pouch under my shirt!"

THEY came in a rush with sixguns singing a dirge of death. They charged the open doorway and were met in kind. Lance Derrick triggered lead at the doorway without picking targets. The marshal, forced to duck beneath the bar for shelter, had crawled to a new location and was firing from a prone position at one end of the mahogany.

Again the attackers retreated, leaving a slain man in the doorway. "Lew Jerabeck," Sheldon identified the man. He rushed over, dragged the body inside, and slammed and barred the slab door.

Lance was reloading.

"It blinds us," the marshal remarked, "but I feel safer with it shut. With Lew dead they'll be—"

The crash of an object slammed with battering-ram force against the rear door, jerked them both around with guns flaming. Slugs ripped through wood, spraying splinters, and a man yelped in pain. Then Lance was hurled backward into a light and blood-streaked darkness.

The floor felt cool beneath his cheek, and Lance Derrick would gladly have lain there in peace. But there was no peace. Bullets spattered through both rear and front doors, running footsteps sounded on the sloping roof above, and an axe bit through the stout shingle boards.

Sheldon cried out involuntarily and crumpled in a heap near Lance. "Would have to be the same shoulder that got hit again," he muttered, pulling himself to a sitting position and gritting his teeth against the pain as he sent lead through the barred door at the unseen gunmen.

Lance fired from where he lay, emptying one Colt into the roof boards near the axe cut. He was rewarded by a scream of agony and a scurry of retreating bootsteps.

"We're dead ducks here." He spoke through teeth clenched against the throb of his head wound. "Load me a pair of sixguns full up, and I'll clear the back door. Then you jump through as far as you can and give me cover while I duck out. At least, we can see what we're fighting if we make it outside."

Inwardly he cursed his stupidity in letting himself be trapped in Mestino Post in the belief that the Jerabeck's would not invade Mestino. He punched fresh loads into his guns, slid one into leather, and stuck the other into his wasteband. Hurriedly he loaded a second pair.

Sheldon had loaded four pistols in addition to his own holstered pair. He found pencil and paper, hastily scribbled at the top Bill for Damages to Mestino Post and signed his name and authority at the bottom. He placed it on the bartop and weighted it was a beer stein.

"I'll clear the doorway," he told Lance. "Be ready to run when my guns run empty. I'll be on your heels."

Overhead the axe again bit into the roof, once, twice. Lance forced his aching frame alongside the wall near the doorway; then Sheldon began a drumming roll of gun-thunder, sending lead jetting from two side-guns through the cracked slab panels.

The instant Sheldon's gun hammers clicked on spent hulls, Lance was unbarring the door with the heels of gun-gripping palms and darting out into the afternoon light with Colt muzzles swinging. But there were no targets. Almost instantly Lance saw what had sent the Jerabeck wild-bunch seeking cover. Lining the opposite bank of the Bravo, probably first spotted by the axeman atop the

Post, was almost a score of mounted men —Sheriff Niles's posse.

Lance half spun about to call to Sheldon that the coast was clear and was just in time to see the marshal slide beneath the bar. Several saddled mounts were milling about at the rear tie-rack, and Lance was for taking one and fogging to hell-and-gone away from this hotbed when the thought struck him that Niles, not knowing a lawman was in danger, might leave Johnny Sheldon to his fate. He couldn't run for it now.

If Niles didn't move in with his posse, thinking it a dog eat dog affray and outside his bailiwick to boot, the Jerabeck bunch would soon realize the score and move in to count coup on the wounded marshal before scooting back to their side of the Bravo.

Darting back through the rear doorway, Lance dropped one gun to help Sheldon to his feet. The lawman was only semiconscious.

Half carrying, half dragging the marshal, Lance made his way to the shelter of the boathouse before any of the Jerabacks ventured from cover. They spotted him as he slipped into the riverside shack and when no fire came from the posse, they sent a hail of lead after his retreating form.

Lance dumped the now unconscious lawman into the nearest small boat, shoved it into the water, and jumped aboard. Slugs riddled the walls of the boathouse as the river caught the little craft and carried it out.

A flash of light from the west shore caught Lance's eye. As he turned to look, a rider with a pair of army glasses pointed in his direction. Alongside the rider with the binoculars a second horseman was yanking a saddle-gun to his shoulder. Lance hurled himself flat, and Winchester lead cut straight for him.

Blinding pain shot through him as the boat was caught by the current and flung into midstream. The last he recalled was the whine of lead, lanced both from Mestino and the western bank of the Bravo. . . .

SLOWLY, slowly the room was turning over, and the light was a ball of fire that seared Lance Derrick's eyes.

"You awake yet?" Sheldon's voice was asking.

Lance rolled over on his face. "Dim the light," he muttered. "Where—"

"We're at the ferry house." Sheldon told him, turning the lamp down. "Feel good enough to travel? We've got to get out of this place, *muy pronto.*"

Lance nodded. His head ached dully, and when he touched it, he felt a layer of bandages. "What happened?"

"I'm hazy on all the details myself," the marshal said. "When I came to, I was in a boat, and the ferryman was towing it here. He bandaged us up. He said he knew you and that he'd ride to Red Rock for the sheriff and a doctor."

"He told you I was wanted in Red Rock for murder?" Lance asked.

"No," Sheldon admitted, "but just a few minutes ago, I was rambling around downstairs and saw a poster listing you as worth five thousand dollars to some citizen known as Fulton Gans. I don't guess the ferryman figured I was able to get around, but you started bleeding again, and there was nobody to call for help; so I—"

"I didn't kill Swinney Gans," Lance protested weakly. "I don't guess there's any use telling you that, though. You're not a judge; you're just an officer of the law."

"So far as you're concerned," Sheldon said, "I'm just a fellow who's pretty darned grateful that I'm alive. That's why I'm trying to get you on your feet. The ferryman had been gone over an hour before I found that dodger with the five thousand head money. You'd better try to get some distance between you and here."

Lance heaved himself up on the bed and felt for his boots, pulling them on. "I'd better take the ferry across—"

"Ferry's not here," Sheldon told him. "The boy who works here took it out just before you started bleeding again. That was why I had to go downstairs myself

and see what I could find to fix you up. Somebody on the other side blew a horn—"

"Could be the Jerabecks over there," Lance suggested.

"I thought of that. I've got a pair of horses out back saddled and ready to travel. I doused all the lights down on the first floor before coming back to wake you up." He handed Lance his gun gear and the spare pistol. "You take your pick of the horses and figure your best out. I'm riding for Red Rock. Here's your hat —let's go!"

They quitted the room and went down the hallway shoulder to shoulder. Sheldon gritted his teeth against the wounds in his back and shoulder and Lance Derrick's head was buzzing with pain as they started down the stairway.

Halfway down, Johnny Sheldon halted abruptly, and his head jerked up. Something was wrong down there in the darkness of the lower story. Then Lance stiffened, barked out, "Who's down there?"

The answer was a gunshot that sliced splinters from the wall near by. Another spat after it, cutting felt from Sheldon's hat. Lance Derrick's Colt gave echo to that second blast, and there was a howl of pain below.

They dashed back to the hallway and crouched there against the wall, breathing hard. Then a figure crashed through the window behind them at the end of the hall, and Sheldon emptied a gun into it.

"That's not one of the Jerabeck gunnies," the marshal husked almost apologetically as he lowered the smoking gun muzzle to look at the man he had just slain.

"Fulton Gans," Lance identified the man. "He was after me, though I—"

He swung around, guns bucking. Lead from his Colts sprayed the head of the stairway. The men who had tried to sneak up the stairs fell back into the darkness below. Another one was sprawled on the landing. He was a stranger to Lance.

"A Jerabeck hardcase," Sheldon muttered. "Looks like our friends've joined forces."

"It's odds-on we won't last here," Lance observed. "We might as well try a charge downstairs. In the dark we might be able to get out from under."

"Let's go, cowboy." Johnny Sheldon's grin belied his fear. "I hope your Red Rock sheriff doesn't make the mistake of crossing my gun barrels, because frankly I'm scared and desperate."

"Sheriff Niles can't be along, or he'd've sung out to surrender, instead of trying to Injun up on me like this. The ferryman must've rode straight to Fulton Gans and put him after my pelt. I hate to have to kill anybody, but I don't want nobody sneaking up and killing me. My guns are loaded full up. Let's hit 'em!"

DOWN the staircase they charged side by side with four guns blazing, and the men gathered to charge upward scattered into the dark corners of the big room downstairs and through the two doorways out into the night.

Swerving sideways at the foot of the stairs, Lance was drawing a fresh pair of guns when a dark figure loomed up in front of him with gun ready. The light from the hallway above shown full upon the man's face, and Lance could see in that face, contorted with hate, the likeness of the man slain back at Mestino and whom Sheldon had called Lew Jerabeck.

This, then, must be Fred, last of the Jerabeck brothers, on the kill and mistaking Lance for the man who had downed his kin and carried the papers necessary to draw a fortune from a Denver bank.

As time is measured it was all over in seconds. Lance's guns were only partly drawn and Jerabeck's gun was in line. He sprang up from his crouch, his finger pressing the trigger. Colt sound rocked the room in double thunder, lead burned past Lance to bury itself in a riser of the stairs, and Fred Jerabeck was flung to one side. As Lance hurled himself into the darkness and scrambled behind a chair, he glimpsed the man who had fired from the doorway and was certain that the shot which had struck the gun-bunch leader had been intended for himself. He

snapped a shot at the doorway, but the man had disappeared. Even in the gloom, though, Lance had recognized Philip Gans.

Almost instantly a gun barked from another angle and a voice shrilled, "That cascabel killed Fred! Gun him down!"

Then the gun-storm ripped wide open and hell moved to the west bank of the Rio Bravo as the two remaining Jerabeck gundogs hammered lead at the gathering of Rocking G men.

Lance stood, guns ready.

"You all right, Derrick?" Johnny Sheldon called from the darkness on the other side of the stairway.

Sheldon came over to the crumpled figure of Fred Jerabeck. "Still alive." He produced handcuffs. Outside gun-sound had ceased. "Gans," Johnny Sheldon shouted, "U. S. Marshal Sheldon speaking. I'm coming out. Stand your hand!"

"Come on out, Marshal," a voice answered after a moment's silence. "Phil Gans is shot and dying. They said Lance Derrick was holed up in there."

Sheldon went outside alone. Lance eased to the door, listening.

"Tell the marshal to come over here." It was Philip Gans' voice, weak and blood-choked. "I guess I'm cashing in and I want to tell you all something. Derrick didn't kill my stepbrother. Listen close. Swinney was to've inherited everything Pa left on his twenty-first birthday—that was to've been today. When Derrick and Swinney had trouble, Fulton stole Derrick's rifle out of his saddle-boot 'fore he rode to look for Swinney.

"We took Swinney out to a line cabin to hide till Derrick cooled off. I was talking to him when Fulton shot him down with Derrick's gun. Then he shot again, and I'd've swore he was trying to kill *me!* I was scared to say anything after that, naturally. Then Fulton showed me that our stepmother'd inherit the spread, making it practically ours, and Derrick'd hang for Swinney's killing. That's how it was. I figure I'm dying, anyhow, so Fulton can't hurt me."

Lance Derrick had come out while Gans was speaking.

"The ferryman was supposed to be getting a doctor and the sheriff from Red Rock when he left the Rocking G," Gans spoke up, his voice low. "But I think I got mine." He saw Lance in the moonlight and knew him. "You heard, Derrick? No hard feelin's? Thanks—should've spoke up sooner, but I'd seen Fulton murder Swinney and I was mortally scared. When I saw that fellow start to gun you down tonight, I shot him to save you. Funny, ain't it, after we'd come to get you! I guess we'd been saddle buddies too long for me to let somebody else kill you. Somebody bring me a drink, will you? And yank my boots—" His voice trailed off into silence.

THE ferryman arrived with Sheriff Niles and the doctor in time. Phil Gans was in bed, but he was able to sit up and watch his stepmother sign over title to a section of Rocking G rangeland to Lance and Delia as a wedding gift.

The bride was out on bail, pending an appeal. It was common belief that her sentence would be suspended next term of court, since, legally, her crime could not just be ignored. The judge, who performed the wedding ceremony, refused to commit himself as to the final outcome, though there was a twinkle in his eye when the subject was broached.

Johnny Sheldon was on hand in the role of best man with a reward check for Lance's part in breaking up the Jerabeck gang. He had brought the bridegroom news from Mestino, also.

"You would've laughed yourself sick," he told Lance. "That one-eyed trader charged those dead men funeral expenses for getting themselves killed at Mestino and made out papers claiming all their earthly possessions for payment after he buried them. He refused to come over for your wedding, but he said you could just cancel his bill against you for sheltering your Roddy horse. And he sent you this little gold box for a wedding present—said it was to carry your rabbit's foot in. He said a fool with your kind of luck needed one!" ● ● ●

ROUND TRIP

By CLINTON TAYLOR

I spent my boyhood on a ranch
But I always longed to roam,
So at the age of twenty-one
I said good-by to home.

My itchy feet led me to go
Out looking for the thrill,
Of finding greener grass that grows
On over the next hill.

I rode out toward the setting sun
To see if I could find
The answer to the tales I'd heard
And ease my wandering mind.

On and on, year after year,
I rode the lonely trails,
Over the mountains, hills, and plains,
Through valleys and through dales.

I often built my campfire
On the banks of a crystal stream
That flowed in a peaceful valley
Where the range was a cowman's dream.

Then I'd swear I'd settle down
And roam no more—until
I began to wonder what there was
Over the next green hill.

I worked on ranches here and there
And down in Mexico,
Mined gold in California,
And logged in Idaho.

But I never stayed in one place long,
For soon I said good-by,
Determined to find that greener grass
Or know the reason why.

And then one day I hit the trail
I'd ridden long ago,
That leads back to the old home range
And my folks in Colorado.

When I rode up to the ranch,
My eyes were opened wide,
For the greenest grass I ever saw
Grew there on every side.

And when I saw my Ma and Pa
Standing by the door
I knew at last I'd found the place
That I'd been looking for.

GUNMAN from

While she fought desperately, John Smith suddenly appeared

He was the kind of man who rode alone . . . that's why the town of Antlers needed him . . . and why the girl thought she hated him!

BACK BEYOND

A Novel by CHUCK MARTIN

CHAPTER I

The Stranger

TWILIGHT was shrouding the wide main street of Antlers when the tall stranger rode in from the west. A mountain man, from the cut of his rigging and gear, and with the stamp of cow-feller branded on him indelibly. Those who could read sign had no need to ask questions as to his occupation or where he came from. He wore two balanced six-shooters in crossed belts which sagged

around his lean middle, and the tie-backs were thonged low for a fast draw.

"A fast gunman from back beyond," John Carson murmured to Mayor Henry DePaw. "Wonder what he's doing here in the Tetons?"

Antlers was a cattle-shipping town at the foot of the Teton range in high Wyoming. "Back beyond" was the wild Idaho cattle country that ranged from the Tetons to the Bitter Roots, a land that moulded its habitués from rock, iron, and rawhide, with little give and no break.

The stranger rode up to the tie rail in front of the Travelers Rest, Antlers' only hotel. He swung lithely to the ground, lifted a pair of saddlebags from behind the cantle of his worn saddle and carrying them across his left arm, walked into the hotel. Cal Blanding owned and operated the hostelry, which was little better than a rooming house; an outlaw slug in his left thigh made riding difficult.

"Evening, stranger," he greeted the tall cowman. "Day, week, or month?"

"I might stay a week," the stranger answered in a voice not given to much talking. "On the second floor front."

Blanding handed him a pen, and the stranger scratched his name: John Smith —Bitter Root.

Blanding smiled; a man's name was his own business, and Bitter Root took in a lot of territory.

"We've got something in common," he said quietly. "I carry a slug in my left thigh; looks like you took yours in the knee!"

Smith straightened and looked the hotel man square in the eyes. His face was bleak and rocky; a knife-scar ran from his left eye to his chin and pulled his mouth into a slight twisted smile.

"Yeah," he answered, "but I still ride —alone!"

Blanding nodded. He could tell that John Smith was a solitary man. There was a peculiar expression in the slate-colored eyes, the look of a man accustomed to gazing into far distances.

"Room twelve," Blanding said. "Corner room on the front. Yell if you want anything. Don't have much help."

Smith picked up his saddlebags and climbed the stairs. John Carson and Henry DePaw strolled in casually to talk to Blanding. Both stared at the name on the rumpled register.

"That ain't his handle," DePaw said slowly. "That hombre is looking for someone, and there will be fireworks when he finds him."

"He ain't a owlhooter," Blanding said quickly.

"You reckon he aims to make Antlers a battleground?" Carson asked anxiously.

"Gents, Smith is a man who has suffered," Cal Blanding stated positively. "I had ought to know; I've done enough of it myself. You noticed that slight limp in his left leg; he stopped a slug above the knee, and he didn't get that scar on his face from playing one old cat!"

"We need a marshal," DePaw said thoughtfully. "One who can run the outlaws out of Antlers and keep them out. You reckon Smith would be interested?"

"I doubt it," Blanding said slowly. "He's got money enough from the looks of his outfit and get-up. Unless . . ." and his voice died away as a speculative gleam appeared in his puckered old eyes.

"Unless what?" the Mayor demanded.

"Unless those owlhooters were the jaspers he's still-hunting for," Blanding answered. "Don't offer him fighting pay if you brace him. Make the stakes high enough for the kind of a game Smith is bound to play."

UP IN Room 12, John Smith had stripped to the waist and was taking a sponge bath. Neck and hands were tanned a deep weathered bronze from sun and wind, but his torso gleamed like white marble. Six feet one in his socks, he was a hundred and eighty pounds of coordinated bone and muscle. His gunbelts still circled his lean hips, even though a chair was propped under the doorknob. Here was a man who took no chances.

His toilet finished, Smith went out to stable his horse. He wore a clean shirt of fine brown wool, open at the neck and

tailored to fit the breadth of his wide shoulders; calfskin vest and hand-made boots; a dinky stetson on his dark-brown head, for Idaho was windy country. He did not look at Blanding as he walked outside.

A squat, stocky man was showing more than passing interest in Smith's deep-chested gelding. The animal carried a Circle Double Cross brand on the left hip, and an expensive hand-made saddle. DePaw and Carson watched from under the board awning of Carson's General Store and Emporium.

Smith stopped when he saw the squat man staring at him. "Name's Crag Suthers; where did you pick up that bronc?" the fellow demanded.

"I know your name; none of your damned business!" Smith answered curtly.

Suthers stiffened as one does when he hears a half-forgotten voice. He turned, caught a glimpse of the scar on Smith's face, and went into swift and deadly action.

Two right hands slapped down at the same time. John Smith's six-shooter came out flaming and roaring like thunder. Crag Suthers blasted a slug into the ground before he could tilt up his gun.

John Smith eared back for a follow-up as he crouched to present a smaller target. Crag Suthers teetered backward, flipped over the tie-rail, and sprawled face down in the ankle-thick dust.

Men came running from the Oasis Saloon, but DePaw reached the tie-rail first. "I saw the whole go-around," he said swiftly to Smith. "I'm the mayor of Antlers. I've got an offer for you if you care to stop over to Carson's store and talk it over!"

Smith looked up coldly. Crag Suthers' boots rattled briefly as a brown stain spread across his dirty shirt front. Smith nodded, holstered his smoke-grimed weapon, and fell into step beside DePaw. He limped slightly as they crossed to the General Store where Carson preceded them to his little office in the rear.

"Thanks, Smith," Carson said quietly, offering his hand. "Crag Suthers was a known outlaw; he killed our last marshal day before yesterday. How'd you like his job—his star—and, mebbe so, his untimely end?"

"Three hundred a month, expenses, and cartridges," DePaw added. "With the town trustees behind you all the way!"

"I'll take it," Smith answered quietly, but his deep voice was grim. "For one month."

DePaw reached into a vest pocket and produced a ball-pointed star. "You are now the Marshal of Antlers!"

Smith accepted the badge and pinned it to the left side of his vest. Then he reached into his watch pocket, and drew out a heavy silver watch on a latigo. A knot was tied in the string; Smith tied another and replaced the watch, showing no expression on his hard face.

"Where's the best place to eat?" he asked the mayor.

"Beefsteak Harry's," Carson answered without hesitation. "Sign the tab and tell Harry to charge the city." He glanced up with a frown as a pretty girl entered the office.

"Marshal, this is my daughter Betty," Carson said gruffly. "Betty, meet Mister John Smith!"

"Howdy, ma'am." Smith tipped his hat with his left hand. "I'll be getting along," he said abruptly.

BETTY CARSON was a slender brunette of nineteen, the prettiest girl in Antlers, and she was not accustomed to indifference. Her dark eyes flashed as she blocked the marshal's way and offered her right hand.

"It's a pleasure, Marshal," she said with a smile. "Did you have to kill that poor man?"

Smith grasped her hand but dropped it quickly as the girl asked her provocative question.

"Yes'm," he answered gravely. "He had a killing coming. Now if you will excuse me?"

He sidestepped quickly, passed the startled girl, and left the store with his peculiar stride. John Carson turned on

his daughter with an angry look.

"Did you have to antagonize the marshal?" he asked brusquely.

"He's a killer," Betty Carson retorted. "A hired killer who earns his living because he is faster than other men!"

"That will do, Betty," Carson said sternly. "We hired him to restore law and order to Antlers, and he has made a good start. He's not interested in you, so leave him alone!"

"His name is not Smith," Betty said quietly, "and he's riding a stolen horse!"

"Eh! What's this?" Carson asked gruffly.

"That horse is branded with the Circle Double Cross," Betty stated emphatically. "When Dale Cross or his brother Jed sees that gelding, what do you think will happen?"

"Whatever happens, I'll bet the marshal can take care of it," Carson answered acidly. "I never cared much for either one of those Cross fellows, and that brand of theirs fits them from neck to ankles!"

"Dale Cross is one of the finest men I ever met," Betty said angrily. "And one of the most fearless," she added.

"And one of the richest men in the country," DePaw added dryly. "Being law-abiding, he won't have any trouble with the marshal. I'll be getting along, John."

He left the store, and Betty Carson turned again to her father. "Where did John Smith come from?" she asked curiously.

"From out yonder," her father answered, waving a big hand toward the setting sun. "We need a man like Smith, and where he came from is none of your business or mine!"

CHAPTER II

Tally String

ON THE MORNING after his arrival in Antlers Smith was making a slow patrol of the town when two men stepped out from the Oasis Saloon. The taller of the two beckoned to the marshal. Smith ignored the summons and proceeded along Main Street, limping slightly. The tall man stepped out to bar his way, a smile on his darkly handsome face.

"My name is Dale Cross, Marshal," he introduced himself. "This is my brother Jediah. We are glad to see some law here in town."

"I'll try to do a job," Smith said and went on with his patrol.

Dale Cross stared after the tall marshal, a frown of anger darkening his face. He was in his early thirties; his brother would be perhaps ten years older. Dale Cross wore expensive tailored range garb, the crossed gunbelts of the two-gun man, and an air of confidence. Jed wore the rough clothing of a working cowboy as befitted the foreman of the biggest cattle spread in the Antlers area.

"There's one gent who won't jump when you crack the whip, Dale," he remarked to his brother. "He'll have to go!"

"You know what to do," Dale Cross said quietly. "It ought to work about noon."

Knowing eyes watched the new marshal as he acquainted himself with the town. He had a nod and a friendly greeting for the old-timers; he could spot the riff-raff with one quick glance. Furtive-eyed gunmen watched him with hate in their slitted eyes, but they gave Smith a grudging respect. Most of them had seen the abortive attempt of the late Crag Suthers; they could read sign as well as the marshal.

It was eleven o'clock when Smith stopped at the mayor's office next door to the jail. DePaw was also justice of the peace and he knew every resident of his town.

"How you making it, Marshal?" he asked Smith.

"Funny," Smith answered thoughtfully. "There's a bunch of gun-hands in town, and most of them work for the Circle Double Cross. How many head of cattle does that outfit run?"

"About three thousand," DePaw answered. "They bought the old Stowe place about three years ago—paid cash for the spread—and they bought some good bulls. Drove in about a thousand head of she-stuff and brought most of their own cowhands. Why do you ask?"

"Any rustling reported?" Smith countered.

"Funny about that," DePaw said slowly. "The Cross brothers reported rustling last year and this. Claimed they lost most of their calf crop both years."

"With all those gun-hung huskies on their payroll?" Smith asked bluntly.

"They claim they made calf tallies both years," DePaw explained. "When they started spring roundup, most of the cows were without calves. That's wild graze back yonder; it takes good brush-popping cow punchers to really make a clean gather!"

"Yeah, I've been back beyond," Smith said quietly. "I'll be getting along."

HE EYED a drunken cowboy who was lounging unsteadily against a tie-rail near the Oasis Saloon. Smith frowned when he saw Betty Carson coming along the board-walk and stepped into a doorway to avoid her.

Betty Carson stepped aside as the cowboy lurched toward her, but he seized her roughly.

"Give us a kiss, sweetheart," the drunk said coarsely.

Smith stepped out fast, swung a stiff right to the cowboy's jaw, and knocked the fellow into the street. Then he whirled with his six-shooter in his right hand as Dale Cross leaped from the saloon, slapping for his holster.

"Hold it!" Smith ordered sternly. "The man is drunk!"

"I'll kill him!" Dale Cross threatened, but he kept his six-shooter in leather.

"You won't," Smith contradicted as he tipped his hat to Betty Carson. "I'm sorry he bothered you, Miss Betty," he said politely, then reached down and jerked the reviving drunk to his feet. "To jail with you, hombre," he said quietly.

The cowboy muttered thickly. "He bought me whiskey and gave me day orders."

"Who gave you orders?" Smith asked sternly.

A gun exploded in the alley which ran alongside the saloon. The cowboy grunted and sagged forward. Smith lowered him to the ground. Bleak hell blazed in his slate-colored eyes when he saw the stain above the man's heart. Betty Carson gasped and ran to her father's store.

The marshal straightened slowly to look for Dale Cross, but Cross had disappeared. Smith shouldered into the Oasis with his gun in his hand.

"Elevate, gents!" he ordered the men in the saloon. "The Law speaking, and I want a look at your hardware!"

He took Dale Cross's weapons from him and smelled the barrels after checking the loads. He went down the line, ignoring the baleful glances of the men as he checked each gun. Jed Cross was the last. His gun was clean, but Smith seized his right hand, carried it swiftly to his nose, and sniffed like a hound.

"You're under arrest, Cross!" he said sternly. "What did you do with the murder gun?"

Jed Cross jerked back into a crouch. Smith also stepped back and put his shoulders against the wall, his eyes mere slits as he watched the murder suspect. Both six-shooters were holstered now.

Jed Cross shouted, "You'll never take me to jail!" and moved with uncanny speed as he struck down for his belt-gun.

But fast as he was, Smith was faster. His hand went down and up like heat lightning, and pale flame winked from the muzzle of his leaping six-shooter. As the roaring blast echoed back from the low ceiling, Smith swung his smoking gun to cover Dale Cross.

Cross, caught with his gun half out of leather, stopped his draw when he stared into the slitted, blazing eyes of the lawman. Jed Cross's body crashed to the splintered planking, and Dale Cross lifted both hands and turned to stare at it.

"Was it a fair shake, gents?" Smith

asked quietly, scanning each face along the bar.

SOME looked away, others nodded their heads. Smith shrugged and backed out of the saloon. He had read approval in the faces of several cattlemen and with them as witnesses he was safe, for the time, from bushwhack lead.

He stopped in the doorway to eject the spent shell from his gun. He set the trigger on half cock, thumbed a fresh cartridge through the loading gate, lowered the hammer again, and holstered the weapon. Then he walked slowly down the street, limping a little.

John Carson was talking with Mayor Henry DePaw when Smith entered the courtroom. Betty Carson was biting her lips nervously. Her face showed relief when she could detect no sign of a wound.

"I was afraid you were killed, Marshal," she said hurriedly. "Dale is one of the fastest men in town."

"He practises every day," her father added forcefully. "Is he dead, Marshal?"

Smith shook his head. "Jed Cross is dead," he said slowly. "I placed him under arrest on suspicion of murder, and he drew on me!"

Betty Carson shuddered and averted her face. "That poor drunken cowboy who was killed," she murmured. "Someone put him up to doing what he did!"

"That's right, Betty," a voice interrupted, and an old cowman walked up to the bench with another man.

"Marshal, meet Sam White of the Box W," Carson said quickly, "and Tom Becker of the Lazy B. You saw the ruckus, Sam?"

"I saw more," White announced grimly. "Jed Cross got Harry Bond blind drunk. Then he led him outside the saloon just before Betty came along. Before that Jed was talking a long time to his brother Dale, and it's my idea those two meant to get Smith between a cross-fire."

"You wouldn't say that to Dale's face!" Betty accused angrily.

Sam White turned slowly. "I'd tell him," he contradicted sternly. "I'd like as not get killed, but I'd tell him!"

"That ain't all, Betty," Tom Becker cut in. "Dale Cross was all set to be a hero and kill poor Harry Bond. The marshal kept him from doing it, and you saw the whole play!"

Betty Carson gasped. "That's right," she whispered. "I remember now!"

"Harry Bond was about to name the man who put him up to it," Smith said coldly. "He was killed by a shot from the alley before he could do it!"

"You had proof that Jed Cross fired that shot?" DePaw asked eagerly.

Smith shook his head. "His gun was clean," he admitted. "But there was the smell of burnt powder on his right hand. He used another gun and hid it some where."

"He was out in the alley," Tom Becker said slowly. "He came back into the saloon just before you entered, Marshal."

"Better send the coroner up," Smith said, and he turned to leave the courtroom. Betty Carson stopped him and spoke softly.

"I'm sorry for what I said, Marshal," she murmured, and then her eyes widened.

SMITH had pulled out his heavy silver watch and was tying another knot in the latigo string.

"What is that?" she whispered.

"A tally string," Smith answered as he replaced the watch in his pocket.

"You've killed three men?" the girl asked faintly.

"That's right; no telling how many good men they killed!"

Betty Carson backed away, staring at the stern-faced marshal with horror in her dark eyes. "Why?" she asked.

John Smith shrugged. "It's a long story and an old one," he said tonelessly. "You wouldn't be interested."

"For something that happened—back beyond?" the girl continued.

"That's right." Smith tipped his hat and walked slowly from the courtroom.

"That fellow's name ain't Smith," old Sam White said positively. "I've seen him

some place before, but I disremember where. It will come to me again, but his name ain't Smith!"

"He looks some like old Clay Fenton," Tom Becker spoke up. "Old Clay used to run a horse-trap outfit back close to the Bitter Roots!"

"Say!" DePaw muttered. "Smith signed the register in the hotel; said he was from Bitter Root."

"Let him be," Carson advised quickly. "It might not be healthy to ask him if Smith is his real name, and he's doing mighty good work here for us."

Betty Carson listened and excused herself. She was very thoughtful when she walked into her father's store, and she stared at the tall marshal's broad back as he continued his way up the street. Walking like a man who had faced death many times and had faced it fearlessly.

"Fenton," the girl whispered. "Clay Fenton from Bitter Root!"

YUMMY

A wonderful range hand
Is Alice McVish—
Can't cook worth a darn,
But, oh what a dish!

—Pecos Pete

CHAPTER III

Smith Gets a Deputy

A WASPY LITTLE MAN with the marks of the long trail hard upon him rode into Antlers on a big horse. He came from the west, tied up in front of the Oasis, and shouldered the swinging doors apart, his right hand close to the belt-gun thonged low on his spindly right leg.

He was small in size, but after one look at his seamed and weathered face, bigger men never made the mistake of calling him "Shorty." He might have been outlaw or lawman. Whatever he was, gunfighter was stamped on him as plainly as the saddle marks on a riding horse.

Some of the Circle Double Cross punchers were gathered for first-drink time; they looked the small stranger over with respectful glances. He laid a gold piece on the wet mahogany, tilted his hat to the back of a balding head, and gave his order to the bar-dog in a hoarse whisper.

"Whiskey straight; the kind your boss drinks. And a chaser of the same. *Andale!*"

"Coming right up with the best," the bartender answered and slid a bottle and shot glass along the bar. Both came to rest in front of the little man, and he poured and downed a drink. He refilled the glass, stoppered the bottle, and drew a long deep breath.

"You come far?" the bar-dog asked with a smile.

"A right far piece, you might say," the stranger answered curtly. "Where I come from, there ain't no law!"

The cowboys glanced at each other knowingly. The stranger was from behind the deadline for sheriffs known as "back beyond."

Dale Cross pushed away from the bar and came slowly down the long room and introduced himself. "You looking for work at fighting pay?"

"Might say I am," the runty stranger answered tartly. Then he took a longer look at Cross. "I'm Tiny Brock, if that means anything to you."

"I've heard of you," Cross admitted. "Hole-in-the-Wall gang some years back, but they split up."

"What for kind of a job?" Brock asked slowly.

"Cleaning out rustlers." Cross answered

without hesitation. "A hundred a month and found, with cartridges supplied."

"I'll sleep on it," Brock said sullenly. He downed his whiskey chaser, hitched up his bullhide chaps, and swaggered from the saloon. He stopped at the tie-rail where a tall man was giving his weary horse a close scrutiny. Then Tiny Brock walked slowly across the boardwalk, dragging his drop-shanked spurs.

"Lose something, mister?" he asked the marshal.

"Nothing I can't find when I want it," Smith answered quietly. "You?"

"Likewise," Brock answered caustically. Jerking his ties loose, he mounted his sorrel and rode toward the livery barn.

Smith watched him for a moment, shrugged carelessly, and resumed his patrol. Jed Cross had been buried after the coroner's jury had rendered a verdict of justifiable homicide. That had been three days ago, and the town had been unusually quiet ever since.

THE Double Cross riders had been drifting to town every day. None had tried to avenge the death of their foreman, but Smith was watchful. He noticed that some of Sam White's boys were usually in town and quite a few of Tom Becker's riders. Both White and Becker had testified that Jed Cross had drawn first the day of the killing.

Smith came to the Longhorn Corral adjoining the livery barn. Tiny Brock was off-saddling his sorrel; he had hung his saddlebags over a top rail of the enclosure. Two other men were arguing in a far corner of the corral, and as Smith passed Tiny Brock, the little gunman said, "Innocent bystander!"

If Smith heard, he gave no sign. He continued his walk with a barely perceptible hitch to his left leg. The two disputants separated and drew apart with the marshal outside the rails but between them. Both were Circle Double Cross men; both had been drinking.

"You're a liar!" one of them shouted and slapped for his six-shooter.

Both men drew and fired at the same time. The marshal leaped wide to the left, and his gun was in his right hand when he landed lightly on the balls of his feet. Two slugs whistled dangerously close as he started that leap. The marshal's gun roared once.

One of the Circle Double Cross men went down as his left leg was cut from under him. The other was drawing a fine bead on the lawman, and Smith knew that he could not beat the gunman with a follow-up. Another six-shooter bellowed thunderously as Smith made a desperate effort to ear back the hammer of his bucking gun. He held his shot, glanced at Tiny Brock, and back to the Circle Double Cross man just as that worthy crumpled in the dust. The wounded man's boots rattled briefly and straightened out.

Smith walked slowly along the rails and stopped close to Tiny Brock. "Thanks, Brock," he said gratefully. "Thanks for everything."

"Think nothing of it," the little man said lazily, but his small greenish eyes twinkled with enjoyment. "I hate a damn sidewinder whatever," he added. "Them two meant to kill you, Marshal."

"You looking for work?" Smith asked. "With your tools?"

"Yeah, with my tools," Brock answered. "Cross offered me a hundred a month and cakes."

"A hundred and a quarter, and you'll earn your pay," Smith offered. "Riding behind a deputy's badge."

"There always has to be a first time," Brock said with a wry grin. "Took. When do I start work?"

"You have," Smith answered as he handed a tarnished star to Brock.

"I do," Brock answered, holding up his right hand. He pinned on the star. "Where you sleeping?"

"Hotel, but there's a cot in a room behind the jail for you," Smith answered. "Most of this is foot work, but you might need your horse once in a while. I'll see you at Beefsteak Harry's for dinner."

He continued down to the courtroom, made a report, and asked DePaw to send the doctor up to the Longhorn Corral.

"One man shot in the left leg," he said curtly. "Other one is dead. I've hired a deputy."

"The city will pay his wages," the mayor answered after he had recovered from his surprise. "What's his name?"

"Tiny Brock. He's a seasoned gunman."

"What else?" DePaw asked. "One twenty-five a month, you say?"

"That's right," and Smith left the courtroom.

He stopped when Betty Carson came out of her father's store and called a greeting. Smith frowned; he wanted to keep an eye on the Circle Double Cross men at the Oasis.

"How are you, Clay?" the girl said with a smile.

Smith looked at her intently. "I've no time for riddles this morning," he said bluntly. "There's a wounded man up in the corral."

"Circle Double Cross man—again?" the girl asked tartly.

"That's right."

"Don't let me keep you from your work, Mister Fenton," the girl said quietly.

"You said Fenton?"

"You've got good hearing."

"So have you," Smith retorted. He walked away rapidly, leaving Betty Carson biting her lip.

DALE CROSS was with the wounded man when Smith reached the Longhorn Corral. He glanced up at the marshal and straightened stiffly, his right hand poised just over his holstered six-shooter.

"Did you shoot Whitey?" Cross asked.

"I shot him."

"Why?"

"He wasn't shooting straight," Smith answered. "Him and the deceased were having an argument, and they both pulled at the same time. Both slugs missed me by inches, if you know what I mean. Few men get the chance to make that mistake twice. Well?"

"Pass it for now," Cross muttered. "Who killed Joe?"

"I did," a raspy voice answered. "You want to make something out of it?"

Dale Cross whirled to face Tiny Brock who was ejecting the spent shell from his .41 Colt. Brock stared at the Circle Double Cross boss while he thumbed a cartridge from his belt and slipped it into the loading gate. Then Cross saw the tarnished star on Brock's worn vest.

"You part of the law?" he questioned.

Brock grinned widely, showing blackened teeth. "Surprises you, don't it?" he asked. "Smith saw your openers and raised you. Those two sidewinders of yours meant to get the marshal in a crossfire. I just don't like sidewinders, human or otherwise."

"I didn't see the ruckus," Cross excused himself. "When I do, things will be different."

"Any time, Cross," Brock said lazily and turned his back on the larger man.

"Yonder comes the doctor," Smith said. "He's likewise the coroner. I've reported this little incident."

Cross tightened his lips and left the corral. Smith did not even glance up from the wounded man who was groaning with pain. The doctor pronounced Joe Mallory dead, then leaned over the wounded gunman.

"Stop bellering," he said roughly. "You got a flesh wound, is all. Can't figure out why the marshal didn't drill you center, you misguided son!"

Smith left the corral when he saw Betty Carson approaching. The girl came up to the corral and spoke to Tiny Brock. She knew about the little man being sworn in as a deputy marshal and she spoke pleasantly.

"How well do you know the marshal?" she asked.

Brock looked up with a scowl. "Smith is my boss," he growled.

"Smith or Fenton?" the girl said softly.

"The dead man is Joe Mallory," Brock corrected. "He was working for a gent name of Cross. Of the Circle Double Cross," he added spitefully. "The brand fits him like a roper's glove!"

"You would not dare to say that to Dale Cross!" the girl said angrily.

Tiny Brock smiled coldly. "I said as much to him not five minutes ago," he contradicted. "Now just what in time are you talking about, miss?"

"You rode in from back beyond, too," the girl answered. "I just thought perhaps you knew him better than we do here in Antlers."

"Could be I do, lady," Brock said irritatingly, "but it ain't healthy to ask too many questions—unless you are a girl."

"What do you mean by that remark?"

"What I said," Brock answered saltily. "A woman asks questions that would get a man shot. Most of them know it. It was nice meeting you, lady."

He touched his worn hat with his left hand, hitched up his gun-belt and chaps, and walked down the street toward Beefsteak Harry's. Betty Carson stared at him with anger flushing her pretty face.

"I hate him!" she said spitefully. "Smith or Fenton, or whoever he is!"

CHAPTER IV

No Jurisdiction

TOM BECKER rode into town on a lathered horse and tied up in front of the jail. Smith and Brock had just returned from breakfast. They greeted the old cattleman cordially, but Becker was in no mood for niceties.

"Rustlers working on my range, Marshal!" he announced excitedly. "You're a cow-feller; you better ride back with me and have a look!"

Smith slowly shook his head. "I'm town marshal of Antlers," he reminded Becker. "You'll have to see the sheriff or one of his deputies."

Becker turned abruptly and walked out of the jail. He hurried to the mayor's office and found Henry DePaw talking with John Carson.

"There's rustling going on," Becker announced. "Your new marshal says he has no jurisdiction outside of town."

"That's right," DePaw agreed. "Since when have you needed the outside law to stop rustling on your own range?"

"You used to run cows, Carson," Becker addressed the storeman. "How can you tell what brand to stamp on a weaner calf?"

"That's easy," Carson answered promptly. "The calf will be with an old cow and like as not trying to suck. You brand the calf with the same iron its mother carries."

"Nuh uh," Becker said coldly. "Not in this case, you don't."

"What you getting at?" Carson asked irritably.

"My boys found a sleeper," Becker explained. "A calf that must have broke away from a bunch. It's branded with a CF iron. The F is inside the C. The mother cow is carrying a Circle Double Cross brand!"

"Seems to me you'd have notified Dale Cross," DePaw interrupted. "That's his brand; the Circle Double Cross. It must be one of his calves somebody mavericked out in the tangles."

Becker stared at DePaw for a long moment. "We've had enough trouble," he said slowly. "Most folks around here don't care too much for Dale Cross and his gun-hung crew. It means a range war, but the law ought to have a look for evidence."

"I'm a special deputy sheriff," Carson said slowly. "The sheriff appointed me because we have no regular deputy here. Mostly to keep down trouble at the dances, and I've never taken the job seriously."

"Yeah, I know," Becker said with a grim smile. "So for one time you better take it seriously. Better saddle a horse and ride out a ways with me for a look-see, deputy."

Carson sighed and shook his head. "Was a time I worked cattle myself," he said heavily. "Lately, Betty does all the riding for the both of us."

"That's another thing," Becker said. "You better tell Betty not to ride out in that back country alone. There's a lot of

hard cases riding the tangles."

"Better ride with Tom," DePaw told Carson. "I'd go myself, but being judge here, it wouldn't look good."

CARSON sighed again and said he would leave word at the store and would meet Becker at the Livery barn. He frowned when he found Betty waiting at the livery barn where the hostler was saddling two horses.

"I'm going along, Dad," the girl announced. "I've been talking to Mr. Becker." She glanced at the badge on her father's vest. "It's nice to have some law in our own family," she said with a smile.

"I wish it was Smith instead of me," Carson said grouchily. "I'm no fast gunman, and there are plenty of them between here and back beyond!"

"Yeah, and they're getting closer all the time," Becker added. "When outside rustlers come right on my range to maverick another man's stock, it's time for us to do something about it."

The three mounted their horses and rode down the street. Tiny Brock saw them ride past and spoke to the marshal.

"I don't like that none, Marshal. Old man Carson and his gal are riding out with Tom Becker, and there are a lot of hard cases hiding out in the brakes not too far from here."

"I need a day off," Smith said suddenly. "You can hold down the law in town while I ride back there and take a look."

"Don't do it, Marshal," Brock warned. "You just might be a target for bushwhack lead. You've made a lot of enemies hereabouts, and some of them ain't above shooting you in the back from the brush."

"That's a chance any lawman has to take," Smith said with a grim smile.

"That Carson gal," Brock said slowly. "She's mighty curious about you."

"All women are curious," Smith answered carelessly. He left the jail office and walked slowly to the livery stable to saddle his horse.

The hostler, an old stove-up cowhand, came slowly from the back of the barn as Smith was brushing his horse.

"Morning, Marshal," he said slowly. "My name is Hoss Blake, and I made a hand for twenty years on the Box W outfit owned and rodded by old man Sam White. A gent was in here late yesterday afternoon and he's taken more than a passing interest in that Circle Double Cross hoss of yours."

"What did he look like, Hoss?" Smith asked.

"Tall slender gent, around thirty years old, little black mustache, and he wore a brace of tied-down hog-legs," the old hostler answered. "He said that hoss looked like one that belonged to a pard of his who was found dead back in the far hills."

Smith stared hard at the old hostler. "You catch his name?" he asked.

"One of the Circle Double Cross hands called him something like vinegar," Blake answered.

"Was it *Vinegarone?*" Smith asked in a whisper.

"That's it, Marshal," Blake answered. "Vinegarone. Better watch out for that feller, Marshal."

"I'll do that," Smith promised with a smile. He saddled and bridled his horse, shoved a saddle-gun in the scabbard under his left fender, and mounted. With a wave of the hand at Hoss Blake, he cantered slowly toward the west.

TOM BECKER and the Carsons were out of sight, but their trail was easy to follow. This was Smith's first day in the saddle since he had signed on as marshal of Antlers. It felt good to have a horse under him again after ten days on foot. Five miles and an hour later the marshal heard the sound of voices up ahead and drew rein in a thicket. He swung to the ground, tied his horse, and made his way slowly through the dense brush.

He paused on the top of a little rise that looked down into a grassy draw. A Lazy B cowboy was standing guard over a weaner calf that had been roped and hog-tied. An old cow near by carried the Circle Double Cross brand on her left hip.

Tom Becker was on the ground: Carson and his daughter sat their saddles between the old cow and the calf. Becker leaned down and pointed to the brand on the calf.

"This is a CF brand, Carson," he said gruffly. "What do you make of it?"

Carson scratched his lean jaw. "The other day you mentioned something about a jasper in the back country you used to know," he reminded Becker. "Said the new marshal reminded you some of him. What was his name?"

"That's why I brought you out here," Becker said triumphantly. "His name was Clay Fenton, and this CF brand is the one he used to run before he was killed by rustlers!"

"How long ago was this?" Carson asked with interest.

"About three-four years ago," Becker answered. "The way I heard it, three CF men were killed, and another was wounded so bad I believe he cashed in his chips later. About eight hundred head of CF cattle were rustled. Like as not the rustlers drove them south and sold them for reservation beef for the Indians."

Betty Carson sat very still. Tom Becker jerked the piggin' strings and allowed the calf to get to its feet. It ran to the old cow and tried to suckle.

"Men, and even cowboys, you can fool," Becker said quietly. "But you can't fool an old cow and her calf. The day is past when a cow-feller with a fast horse, a long rope, and a running iron can get him the start of a herd. Looks like Dale Cross has some foundation for those rustling charges he made!"

"The new marshal," Betty Carson said suddenly. "You said he looked like old Clay Fenton!"

Carson and Becker stared at each other. "Could be he does," Carson said slowly. "But we'd have to have more than that to go on."

"John Smith," Betty repeated just above her breath. "If his name is John Smith, mine is Pocahontas!"

Her father shrugged irritably. "You're just guessing," he said over his shoulder. "Things were getting out of hand until we made Smith town marshal. Antlers was full of outlaws who were wanted in other states."

"It still is," Betty said stubbornly. "It takes a thief to catch a thief!"

In the concealing mesquite Smith heard, and a flush of anger stained his dark face. He made his way silently back to his horse, careful not to wave the tops of the brush. He mounted and walked his horse until he came to the trail. Then he nicked the sorrel with a blunted spur and galloped down his back-trail. He stopped at the hotel, packed his saddlebags, carried them to his horse where he placed them behind the cantle. Then he rode to the jail office where Tiny Brock was sitting with his spurred feet on an old oak desk.

"You're promoted, Tiny," Smith told the old-timer, taking off the ball-pointed star. "From now on you are Marshal of Antlers. I'm heading out for the brush!"

"Any particular reason?" Brock asked slowly.

"I wasn't cut out for a lawman," Smith said bluntly.

"This is my first go-around at it, too," Brock said. "Hold your bronc a spell, and I'll ride with you. If you can sleep with the owls, so can I."

"You've got to stay, Tiny," Smith said earnestly. "There's a gent by the name of *Vinegarone* in town. That isn't all. The trustees have got the idea that my name isn't Smith. They think I might be some kin to some old cowman back in the brakes who got killed three-four years ago. Gent by the name of Clay Fenton."

"Are you?" Brock asked innocently.

"What do you think?" Smith asked icily.

"Up to now I ain't been paid to think," Brock answered. "I might get around to it sooner or later, but not too soon. You better light a shuck while you can!"

Next Issue: HELL WAS MADE FOR SQUATTERS by TOM ROAN

CHAPTER V

All Woman

BETTY CARSON rode a wide circle to satisfy herself that she was alone. She reined in her horse at the margin of a deep pool, stared at the cool water longingly, then walked her horse to an alder thicket where she dismounted and tied up.

The pool was fed by a small waterfall that cascaded down musically from a little bluff twenty feet above. A vision of loveliness stepped from the alder thicket, poised briefly on the grassy margin, and then dove cleanly into the cool water.

Betty came up at the far edge of the pool, pulled herself from the water, and stretched luxuriously. She wore a short pair of tights, such as dancers use, and a tight chemise that fitted her like a second skin. Again she dove into the pool and swam under the falls.

She did not hear the horse coming through the grass, and after emerging from under the falls, she stretched out on the grass to sun herself. This was her favorite spot for relaxation, one of the few places where a girl could bathe in privacy. She slipped the straps down from her shoulders, and for a time, bare to the waist, basked in the warm afternoon sun.

"Very pretty," a masculine voice said softly. "I've never seen a prettier girl—or one that I wanted more!"

Betty screamed and tugged the straps up over her shoulders. She leaped to her feet like a frightened fawn, her eyes wide with shame and fright. A tall slender man with a little black mustache was facing her with a smile on his dark face and with lust gleaming in his black eyes.

The girl dodged past him, but the tall man pursued and caught her just as she reached the little mesa above the pool.

"You got me crazy, gal," he murmured, folding his arms around her. "Laying there in the sun, as inviting as a long cool drink. Scream your head off. No one can hear you back here!"

Betty Carson fought with all her strength. The man held her powerless. His arms tightened until the breath was squeezed from her lungs, and she felt her strength leaving her.

"I take what I want," the tall man murmured, as he forced her head back with his chin.

Betty Carson felt her senses reeling. The shoulder straps had slipped down, her arms were pinned at her sides. The thin lips were close to her face when a swift shadow darted out just above her half-closed eyes. She heard a dull thud as a fist struck her captor's jaw, felt his arms loosen, and then she was falling backward through space. She did not even feel the cool water close about her when she struck the pool under the falls.

John Smith kicked the six-shooter from the stranger's holster. Then he ran down the path, unbuckling his gunbelts and chaps as he ran. He laid them aside, kicked off his boots, and dove into the pool toward the falls. The stunned girl was lying on the bottom of the pool, and he swam down with strong, powerful strokes.

HE CAUGHT one of the shoulder straps and forced his way up to the surface. As he crawled out of the pool with his unconscious burden he heard a horse racing toward the east. Peering that way, Smith recognized the man known as Vinegarone clinging to the saddle.

Smith pulled the girl out on the grassy margin, turned her face-down, began artificial respiration. As he worked over her the hard fighting expression left his tanned face. Betty Carson's lithe young body was firm and cool to his touch, and the smoothness of her skin did something to him.

When the girl coughed and tried to sit up, Smith reached down and pulled the shoulder straps into place. Betty turned quickly and looked up at her rescuer with fear in her brown eyes.

"You're all right now, Miss Betty,"

Smith said quietly. "You fainted or you wouldn't have needed my help."

"Marshal!" the girl gasped. "Where is that terrible man?"

"Gone," Smith said soothingly. "You fell over the cliff under the falls." He went on: "I was tracking Vinegarone. I saw him ride up and dismount above the falls."

A flush stained Betty Carson's dusty cheeks. "You saw me?" she whispered.

"I was watching Vinegarone," Smith assured her.

Betty Carson's lip began to quiver and she crept into Smith's arms like a little girl who has been badly frightened and needs assurance. Smith's arms tightened about her as her body shook with sobs.

"Don't cry now, honey," he said tenderly. "You're safe, and nothing else matters."

Betty stopped crying, but she clung to the marshal with her face buried in his shoulder. Neither spoke until she had composed herself, but they seemed to have found a bond of understanding in their silence. Smith raised his head and listened intently.

"Horse coming, Betty," he said softly. "You'll want to get into your rigging."

Betty jumped up and ran lightly to the alder thicket. She had never felt like this before—so relaxed and vitally alive.

Smith pulled on his boots, got into his chaps, and buckled on his crossed gunbelts. The rider was Dale Cross, and he carried a rifle across his knees.

Cross stopped his horse abruptly when he saw Smith beside the pool, and the rifle swiveled in his hands. But Smith was ready, his right hand moving swiftly and coming up with a cocked six-shooter to cover the threatening Circle Double Cross owner.

"You've got no jurisdiction back here!" Cross shouted.

"Don't need any," Smith answered quietly. "It's a free country, and I'm not on your range."

"You were on my range this morning," Cross answered, riding closer. "I know all about you!"

"Likewise," Smith answered calmly. "So?"

"I'm signing a rustling charge against you," Cross said crisply. "You might as well ride back to town and turn in your star."

"I've turned it in," Smith surprised the rancher by saying. "Now I can work on a little problem of my own!"

"I'm giving you warning, Smith, or whatever your name is," Cross said grimly. "Leave Betty Carson alone. She is going to marry me!"

JOHN SMITH stiffened a trifle. Then he saw Cross's triumphant smile fade as the rancher heard the voice of Betty Carson behind him.

"You can tell Mr. Smith that you made a mistake, Dale Cross," the girl said coldly. "I am not going to marry you!"

"But I thought—" Cross began.

"You did nothing of the kind," the girl interrupted quickly. "You never asked me to marry you, and if you had, the answer would have been—no!"

"You heard the lady, Cross," Smith said quietly. "Any little difference between you and me can wait for another time."

"Do you have a tall dark man working for you?" Betty asked Cross. "A slender man about thirty, with a little black mustache?"

"Sounds like Vinegarone," Cross answered slowly. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm going to kill him the next time we meet," Smith put in harshly. "Tell him I said so!"

"Oh no," Betty said quickly. "He didn't really hurt me, John!"

Dale Cross stared at the girl with a puzzled scowl. "What did Vinegarone do?" he asked.

"He caught me here by the pool, and tried to—kiss me," Betty said angrily. "Mr. Smith was following your man and he saved me from drowning."

"I'll settle with Vinegarone," Cross said sternly and whirled his horse. "And with you, Smith—later!"

After he had galloped away, Betty turned to Smith. "Did you really turn in

your star?" she asked.

Smith nodded. "I'm a sneak. I heard your father and old Tom Becker talking about me where they found that Circle Double Cross cow and calf," he admitted honestly.

"Then you heard what I said," the girl said slowly.

"I heard what you said."

"Is it true?" Betty asked. "Are you kin to that man who was killed back beyond by rustlers?"

"It could be," Smith answered reluctantly.

"Were you the man who was wounded badly?" Betty asked hopefully. "When all the rest were killed?"

"I was that man," Smith admitted. "That's all I'm going to say, and you better be getting back to town before your father gets worried."

"Ride a piece with me, John," the girl pleaded. "I don't feel the same after what happened back here today."

"My horse is above the falls," Smith answered gruffly. "I'll meet you up there."

CHAPTER VI

Make Your Pass

WHEN TINY BROCK walked into the livery barn, Hoss Blake met him in the areaway between the stalls. The two men looked each other over critically, as though noting the tolls taken by the passage of the long years. Blake spoke first.

"Tiny, you wrinkled up old wart-hog," he greeted the deputy marshal. "Thought mebbe you didn't want to know an old saddle pard."

"I remembered you, you hoop-legged old pelican," Brock said with a grin, and his voice held a note of affection. "Where'd the boss go?"

"I should ask the marshal about his business," Blake said scathingly. Then he leaned closer. "He lit out for the brakes over beyond Tom Becker's graze," he whispered hoarsely. "Carson and his gal rode yonderly with Becker—something about rustling."

"He ain't marshal any more," Brock said slowly.

"The hell you whisper!" Hoss Blake exclaimed. "He won't last long now. Dale Cross has too many gunhawks on his payroll, and the worst of the lot is this gent they call Vinegarone."

"He'll last," Brock said tersely. "Oh-oh," he muttered. "Yonder comes Carson and Becker."

The two men rode into the barn and dismounted. Carson stretched his legs gingerly after turning his horse over to Blake.

"Did Betty get back?" he asked.

"Not yet, Mr. Carson," Blake answered.

"Did you see the marshal?" Brock asked.

"You mean he rode out after us?" Carson asked quickly.

"Said he'd catch you up," Blake explained.

"And he's one of the best trackers in the mountains," Brock added.

"I've got to get back to the store," Carson said shortly. "Tell Smith I want to see him as soon as he gets back."

"He won't be back," Brock said slowly.

"What did you say?"

"He done turned in his star," Brock replied. "Asked me to take over and rod the law in his stead. That suit you and the mayor?"

"It don't suit me any," Carson said tersely. "You're damn near as old as I am, Brock. We've had three marshals killed until Smith rode in and evened the odds some."

"I take a heap of killing," Brock answered carelessly. "Well?"

"It's your funeral," Carson said fretfully. "How much do you know about Smith?" he asked the old-timer.

"Considerable." Brock surprised Carson with his answer. "He's one of the fastest gun-hands I've ever seen and he can call his shots. Good all-around cowboy, he don't drink or hell around and he

don't know the meaning of fear."

"You knew him before," Carson accused bluntly. "What's his right name, if I'm not out of order?"

"John Smith," Brock answered blandly. "It says so on the register up at the hotel."

"I should have known better," Carson admitted. "If he does come back, tell him to see me," he added and left the barn.

TOM BECKER was staring at Brock. "I knew a man by the name of Clay Fenton years ago," he said quietly. "John Smith is the spitting image of old Clay."

"Is that so?" Brock asked innocently. "What kind of a hombre was this Clay Fenton?"

"Cowman from hocks to horns," Becker answered promptly. "Used to run mebbe seven-eight hundred head of cattle over along the Yellowstone. Outlaws raided his place three-four years ago, the way I heard it, and killed old Clay and two of his hands. His brand was the CF, with the F inside the C."

"Hmm," Brock mused. "Seems I've heard of that brand some place."

"Old Clay had a son," Becker continued. "He'd be about twenty-four years old. That is, if he wasn't killed in that raid."

"Interesting," Brock agreed. "Well, I got to be getting about my law chores."

"Just a minute, Brock," Becker said quietly. "We come on a rustling this morning back on my graze. We found an old Circle Double Cross cow with calf at side. The calf was branded with the CF iron. Thought mebbe you'd like to know."

"My jurisdiction is right here in town," Brock answered evenly. "Mebbe you had better notify the sheriff over at the county seat."

"Good idea," Becker agreed and mounting his horse, rode up the street.

"Don't go, Tiny," Hoss Blake whispered hoarsely. "Yonder comes that Vinegarone feller. Why don't you get back there in one of those stalls for a listen?"

"Good idea," Brock agreed and went into a roomy stall.

The tall dark rider rode into the barn and swung to the ground. There was a noticeable swelling on his jaw, and his dark eyes were smoldering. Blake led the horse back into the barn. Vinegarone was waiting when he returned from stripping the riding gear.

"You seen the boss?" he asked Blake.

"What boss?"

"Dale Cross," the angry man snapped.

"Oh, him," Blake said disparagingly. "He rode out shortly after noon. He comes and goes like the wind, and nobody knows."

"Nobody knows what?"

Hoss Blake stopped and looked the dark man over. "Does any one know where the wind goes or where it comes from?" he demanded truculently.

"Lay your hackles, wrangler," Vinegarone said soothingly. "Come to think about it, nobody does."

He glanced up as hoofs came from the street. He had stepped inside the barn when Betty Carson and Smith rode into the lot. They stopped at the tie-rail and dismounted, and Smith tipped his hat and prepared to mount again.

"Better not ride alone for a while, Betty," he said softly. Then he heard old Hoss Blake cough inside the barn.

Smith turned his head at the sound. He saw Vinegarone standing in the barn entrance with his hand hooked in his belt. Smith stepped away from his horse. Not a word had been spoken, but he could read murder in the dark smoldering eyes of the man who had attacked Betty Carson.

"Tod Hunter was a pard of mine," Vinegarone said slowly. "You killed him back beyond and stole his horse. I've taken up for Tod!"

Betty Carson gasped but remained silent. She knew what might happen if she interfered, or even cried out. This was something deadly and final, and she hated Vinegarone with all the feeling of a ranch girl, born and raised.

"Any time you're ready," Smith said quietly. "This time I can see you."

"I'll finish the job this time," Vinega-

rone boasted. "And I don't mind telling you I'll collect a bounty on your scalp!"

STARING at the vicious face, Smith put his left hand to his cheek and gently rubbed the long scar, a scar made with a sharp knife and running from eye to chin. Betty was watching him intently.

Smith's slate-colored eyes were now hooded and glowed with a reddish light. "You talked out?" he asked thinly.

"Yeah. You?"

"Make your pass!" Smith barked.

Vinegarone acted instantly. His right hand slapped down to his holster without warning. Smith's hand went down and up in one smooth motion. His six-shooter roared savagely just as the other man's gun was clearing leather.

Vinegarone was spun around as his gun spilled from his shattered hand. He braced himself, and his left hand went up behind his neck. It came out with a thin-bladed throwing-knife as Smith was earing back the hammer of his bucking gun for a follow-up.

Smith pressed trigger just as the knife came forward for the throw. The blade skittered through the air in a slow and uncompleted circle. Grunting, Vinegarone gave a back step. He went into a rubber-legged pirouette and crashed to the ground on his back. A dull stain appeared on the left side of his shirt, as his boots rattled a tattoo of defeat.

Smith straightened up, ejected the spent shells from his gun, and reloaded. Then he reached for his heavy silver watch—and tied a knot in the latigo. He replaced the watch in his pocket, removed his hat, and turned to Betty Carson.

"I'm sorry you had to see this," he said gently. "I'll be riding."

"Just a minute, Smith," Tiny Brock said gruffly, emerging from the barn. "Mr. Carson would like to have a talk with you."

"Some other time," Smith said wearily as he started for his horse.

"Smith!"

"Yeah?"

He turned. Brock was covering him with a six-shooter. "Mr. Carson would like to have a talk with you." Brock repeated. "You better see him."

"You mean—I'm under arrest?"

"Temporary custody," Brock corrected. "I'm obeying orders; you better do the same!"

"Like you said," Smith agreed. "You'll have to make a report. We might as well go together."

Betty Carson ran from the corral and hurried to her father's store. Smith smiled and began to walk slowly toward the courtroom. Tiny Brock holstered his gun and walked two paces behind the former marshal.

"You've got four knots in that tally string," Brock said softly.

"Yeah," Smith growled. "And one to go!"

"Vinegarone had a killing coming," Brock said. "Self-defense; you'll be acquitted."

They reached the courtroom and went in. John Carson was talking with Mayor Henry DePaw. Betty Carson was listening; she smiled as the two men approached the bench. DePaw looked up sternly.

"Did you kill a man known as Vinegarone?" he asked.

"I did, Your Honor!"

"You protected yourself?"

"That's right!"

"Just a minute while I look up the law," DePaw said, fumbling with some papers.

CHAPTER VII

According to Law

SMITH WATCHED curiously as the mayor fumbled through a stack of papers. Tiny Brock stood behind his prisoner, but he had not taken the former marshal's guns. John Carson watched the judge with an expression of anticipation on his seamed and weathered face.

"I have it right here," DePaw said, as he picked up a paper. "James Crenshaw, alias Vinegarone, is wanted for murder and armed robbery. Five hundred dollars will be paid for his capture—dead or alive!"

Smith frowned. "I'm no damned bounty hunter," he said slowly.

"The dead man was," Tiny Brock spoke up. "I heard him say he was going to collect a bounty on your scalp!"

"Pass that for now," DePaw said gravely, looking up at Smith. "Place both hands on the bar in front of you," he ordered sternly.

Smith did as he was directed. The judge picked up another paper and cleared his throat.

"John Smith, I have a warrant here for your arrest," he said clearly. "The complaint was signed by Dale Cross and charges you with rustling one Circle Double Cross calf!"

"Until he gets legal counsel, Your Honor, I'll act for the defendant," Carson interrupted. "The plaintiff has no proof to support his charge, but law is law. I am asking that you set bail for the defendant at five hundred dollars. The reward will cover the bail!"

Henry DePaw's eyes twinkled. "So ordered, Marshal," he said crisply. "The defendant has surrendered himself without offering resistance. His bail is set at five hundred dollars, covered by the reward offered by the State of Texas. Court is dismissed!"

Smith stepped back and lowered his hands. He seemed stunned by the swift events.

"Never saw the law move so fast in all my life," he murmured.

"It will move even faster," a voice spoke from the door, and Dale Cross came into the room with his cocked six-shooter in his right hand. "Arrest that killer for murder!" he barked at Brock.

Tiny Brock stepped in front of Smith. "Holster that pistol, Cross!" he ordered sternly. "Or answer to my gun right now!"

"Arrest that man!" Cross repeated. "You'd never match your draw against my drop!"

Smith moved to the right. "One of us can," he said quietly. "If you get Tiny, I'll get you, or vicey versy."

"Put up your hardware, Cross!" DePaw snapped. "After which the court will hear your complaint!"

Cross glowered but holstered his six-shooter. "I'll sign the complaint," he growled. "Smith killed one of my riders, a fellow named Vinegarone!"

"Your Honor," Brock said clearly, "I'll sign a complaint against Dale Cross of the Double Cross for harboring a known criminal!"

"So ordered," DePaw agreed. "Do your duty, Marshal."

"You're under arrest, Cross, of the Double Cross," Brock said spitefully. "Vinegarone, or James Crenshaw, was wanted for murder and armed robbery. Five hundred dollars worth," he added. "Smith collected the reward!"

"WHAT kind of law is this?" Cross asked angrily. Then he smiled. "Did you serve that warrant I signed?" he asked Brock.

"I served it," Brock answered with a grin. "The judge set bail for the defendant at five hundred dollars, and your pard, Vinegarone, paid the bail!"

"So," Cross said in a husky whisper. "You can't say I didn't try all the due processes of law. Now I'll protect my own interests!"

"Yeah, you do that," Brock called after the departing cowman. "We'll be seeing you around."

"You are free to go, Smith," DePaw told the former marshal, "I have a voucher here for you for two weeks' pay."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Smith answered. "Use the voucher to pay what I owe in town. Meals and hotel and my barn bill."

"We guaranteed your expenses," DePaw reminded. "And you've earned more than you got. Until after the trial, don't leave the county."

Smith nodded and left the courtroom

with Betty Carson. He felt strained and ill at ease as though he wanted to get away from the restraints of the charge against him.

"You will stay at the hotel?" Betty asked.

"For tonight, at least," Smith answered.

"Have supper with us," the girl invited eagerly. "Mother wants to meet you."

Smith frowned but accepted. "I'll want to clean up some," he said. "I'll get my saddlebags and go on to the hotel."

"Six o'clock," Betty reminded. "Mother makes the best green apple pie."

Back at the hotel, Smith propped a chair under the door-knob and broke down his right-hand gun for a thorough cleaning. He drew his spare from the left holster when a knock sounded on the door. He removed the chair, and Tiny Brock came into the room.

"Smith," the runty deputy marshal said quietly, "don't you think this has gone far enough?"

"It won't be long now," Smith answered grimly, and he fingered the tally string fastened to his watch. "Let's leave it this way for now."

Brock sighed. "Like you said, Smith. You eating with me tonight?"

Smith shook his head. "I'm having supper with the Carsons tonight. I couldn't get out of it," he said slowly.

"That's one way to suffer without pain," Brock remarked acidly. "Betty Carson is the prettiest filly in these parts."

"Yeah," Smith agreed his eyes lighting up. "She certainly is."

Brock said quietly, "She likes you more than a little."

Smith frowned. "I don't think so. She saw me kill a man this afternoon, and you know how women feel about such. Now you get to hell out of here while I clean up."

"See me before you leave town," Brock said, as he left the room.

"The law speaking?" Smith asked.

"An old saddle-pard speaking," Brock answered. "You heard me—Smith!"

Tiny Brock left the hotel, and Smith went back to his interrupted ablutions. He polished his boots, brushed his jacket and extra pair of pants, and shaved carefully. Like most cowboys who were called properous he had a wash and wear in the way of clothing. He brushed his small stetson last, snugged it firmly on his head, twitched his twin guns against hang, and left the hotel to keep his supper date.

IT DID not surprise him, when Betty admitted him to find all the trappings of a cowman in the Carson house. Mrs. Carson came in from the kitchen, a plump, pleasant woman in her early forties.

"I've heard so much about you, Mr. Smith," she said with a smile. "And I want to thank you for saving my girl this afternoon."

She smiled at Smith, and then kissed him on the cheek. "See him blush," she said to Betty. "It is a mighty good sign when a man his age can still blush."

"Yes'm," Smith murmured. "I'm mighty happy to meet you, ma'am."

"Well, make yourself to home," she said and went back to the kitchen.

"I like her," Smith told Betty. "My mother passed on when I was twelve years old."

John Carson came in, greeted Smith heartily, and went to wash up. When he had gone, Smith unbuckled his belts and hung them on the back of a chair. You didn't sit down to break bread with a man and his family in his own house and keep your fighting hardware on.

"Thank you," Betty said gratefully. "When are you going to tell me about yourself?" she asked wistfully.

Smith made no attempt at evasion. "It won't be so very long now," he answered earnestly, and his fingers toyed with the string attached to his watch.

Betty shuddered slightly. "One to go," she whispered, and Smith knew she had

[*Turn page*]

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overheard his remark to Tiny Brock. "Where is your ranch?" she asked.

Smith glanced at her quickly. "You mean the old place," he said evasively. "It's back beyond on the Yellowstone River. It isn't much of a spread right now, but I mean to build it up."

Just then Mrs. Carson announced that supper was ready, and they went out to the big kitchen. She indicated a chair for Smith beside Betty. John Carson came in and took the chair at the head of the table.

"Roast beef and fixings," he said appreciatively. "I hope you brought your appetite along, Smith."

"I did, sir," Smith assured his host. He bowed his head when Carson closed his eyes and asked a blessing and murmured "Amen" at the close.

The Carsons asked no personal questions while the meal was in progress. But after the men had retired to the big front room, John Carson filled his pipe, lighted it, and studied his guest with speculative eyes.

"Well Smith," he said, "it's close to showdown, isn't it?"

"I believe it is," Smith agreed.

"You're old Clay Fenton's son," Carson said slowly, and he smiled as he nodded his head.

"I hope to be, after showdown, sir," Smith said quietly. "I'm riding into back country tomorrow, but I'll be back for the trial—or before."

"It has to do with this rustling," Carson said positively. "I'm wishing you luck, but keep your eyes open for trouble. You are a marked man, and some glory hunter might try to earn that bounty on your scalp."

"I know who offered that bounty," Smith said quietly. "I have a few friends and I'm grateful for them."

The subject was changed when the ladies entered the room. After a short visit, Smith asked to be excused, thanked Mrs. Carson for a fine dinner and a pleasant evening, and took his leave. Betty went to the porch with him.

"Do be careful," she warned. "And good luck."

CHAPTER VIII

Hidden Valley

CATHEDRAL PEAK stood out like a great church spire against the eastern sky, towering above the surrounding high mountains. A lone horseman rode along the west Yellowstone just as day was breaking.

He rode up a narrow draw between high walls until he came to the end of a deer run. Catclaw and creosote bush blocked further progress to mark the end of the trail. The early stillness was broken when a man's voice barked a stern command. "Stop where you are, feller, and sing out your handle!"

"John Smith!" was the answer. "I left Antlers in the middle of the night!"

There was a brief silence, then the thud of hoofs, and the impenetrable barrier moved. The brush parted, and Smith edged his horse through the narrow opening. An old cowboy stood his horse a few paces away, straining against a tight-twist rope. He backed his horse as Smith dismounted, and the barrier swung slowly back into place.

"Morning, Boss," the cowboy greeted Smith.

"Howdy, Caleb," Smith answered cordially. "Have you had any trouble here in Hidden Valley?"

"That's a good name for this hide-out," the old cowboy said with a chuckle. "Nary a bit of trouble, but we saw a couple of Circle Double Cross hands riding around yesterday. Old Waco thinks they will strike today, and we're mighty glad you got back!"

The two men rode up the grassy trail and opened a gate leading into a huge grassy valley. Two creeks brawled noisily through the valley from the higher reaches of the mountains which hemmed Hidden Valley in on all sides. Two men, tending to breakfast at a fire, rose.

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"Morning, Waco. Howdy, Brazos," Smith greeted the two old-timers. "That coffee smells good, and I'll take a helping of vittles."

"You've been gone all of three weeks, Boss," old Brazos Thompson said quietly. "You do any good?"

"Don't ask fool questions," Waco Jones growled at Brazos. "Just take a look at that tally string on the boss's watch!"

"Four knots," Brazos said in a hoarse whisper. "Which one got away?"

"The head man," Smith said slowly. "I've got news for you. I was the town marshal of Antlers for more than two weeks."

"I'll be damned," Brazos said, astonished. "And what about Tiny Brock?"

"He's marshal now," Smith answered. "Do you boys remember Vinegarone?"

"Could we ever forget that killer?" Waco retorted. "That's what put me and Brazos straddling the owlhoot trail. He killed that Circle Double Cross hand, and we got blamed for it!"

"I was arrested for rustling," Smith said quietly. "Vinegarone paid my bail."

As the three men stared their unbelief, Smith told them the story. "By dogies!" Brazos whispered. "We're all rustlers!"

"Does it bother your conscience any?" Smith asked.

"Not a damn bit, and the pay is good too," Waco answered with a grin. "Let's eat and get ready to fight some other rustlers."

HE POURED coffee into tin cups and ladled beans and bacon onto tin plates. A lean-to had been built against the rocky walls of the valley on the east side and when breakfast was finished, Smith went to the little shack and dug a tin box from a hole in the dirt floor. From the box, he took a worn book. Brazos Thompson watched while his young boss thumbed the pages.

"We're holding about five hundred and fifty CF calves in here," Smith said to Thompson. "That represents all the calf crop we've rustled from the Circle Double Cross in two years. We sold some of the old cows for reservation beef to pay expenses and we've got perhaps three hundred head of CF cows on the old place."

"I never thought I'd see the day when I'd earn my living rustling," Brazos said with a happy grin. "But enough of chit-chat and fiddle-faddle, boss," he reminded sternly. "That Circle Double Cross outfit is due to strike here today, and we better get out in the tangles to discourage them some."

Smith returned the tally book to its hiding place and once again becoming the hard fighting man, checked his rifle and six-shooters before mounting his horse.

Caleb Connors had changed Smith's saddle from the Circle Double Cross horse to a stout gelding branded with the CF iron. The four men rode down toward the narrow pass and stopped at the camouflaged barrier. Brazos opened it and rode through with Smith, and Waco shut it after them. The two men studied the country toward the east as they followed a game-trail to a ridge. Smith used a pair of field glasses.

"Yonder they come," he said quietly. "Eight men, and one of them is Dale Cross!"

"We know this country, and they don't," Brazos reminded Smith. "I never shot a man from the brush in my life. What's the day orders?"

"You stay here, and I'll take that other ridge," Smith answered. "When they ride close enough, we will shoot over their heads. If they storm the gate, Caleb and Waco will know what to do."

He cased his glasses and rode down the trail. A few minutes later he was perched atop another hogback, covering the trail with his rifle. He and Brazos, on the other ridge, could cover the lower trail with a cross-fire.

The minutes passed with no sound except the calls of jays in the timber. Then Smith saw the Circle Double Cross riders coming through the tangles in a compact group and sent a shot screaming over their heads.

Dale Cross shouted an order, and the raiders rode into the brush. "There they

are," Cross shouted. "Every one of you hombres is drawing fighting pay, and you'll earn it today. Smoke them damned outlaws out!"

Horses were tied in the brush, and men began to crawl forward. Brazos sent a shot at a skulking figure. The man yelled, and rifles barked as Brazos' position was spotted. Smith joined the fight, and Waco and Caleb fired from behind the barrier.

The sniping duel continued for an hour. Smith reloaded his rifle and saw a single rider, out of rifle range, riding east. He used his glasses and frowned when he identified Dale Cross.

"He's going to bring the law," Smith muttered to himself. "Suits me down to the ground!"

DOWN the trail he saw brush move, then six men rode out at a gallop, heading straight for the barrier. Caleb and Waco emptied two saddles, and Brazos accounted for another. The other three whirled their horses and raced back, and Smith held his fire.

He saw the three pull up suddenly when they were out of rifle range. His eyes widened when he put his glasses to his eyes. Now he knew why the Circle Double Cross men had stopped so suddenly. The trail was blocked by another group of armed men, and Smith recognized the leader as Tom Becker of the Lazy B outfit. Smith waited until Becker's crew disarmed the Circle Double Cross men, then left his lookout, walked down to his horse, and rode slowly up the trail to meet the Lazy B men.

His eyes narrowed when he saw John Carson and Henry DePaw with them. Carson saw Smith at the same time and shouted for all hands to hold their fire. Old Sam White had brought along some of his Box W crew, and then Tiny Brock rode out of the brush with a slim rider—Betty Carson.

"Morning, Smith," Carson greeted coldly. "What's this I hear about you leading a rustling outfit back here in the tangles?" he asked.

"Guilty as charged," Smith answered without hesitation. "Didn't Tiny tell you?"

"He said you might need some help with rustlers," Carson answered angrily. "Now you better do some tall explaining. Looks like Cross was right when he signed that complaint against you!"

"Let's ride into Hidden Valley," Smith suggested. "I'll leave it up to Sam White and Tom Becker. Follow me!"

He reined his horse and rode up the trail toward the hidden gate. "Open up, Waco," he called. "We've got visitors."

The cowmen stared as the green barrier swung back. Smith rode through, followed by a dozen men. Tiny Brock called to a Lazy B rider to give him a hand with the three wounded Circle Double Cross men.

"Guard these owlhooters," Brock told the Lazy B puncher. "I better get along to side the boss."

Smith rode up the pass and into the wide valley. Weaner calves and long yearlings were grazing on the lush grass near the two streams. Tom Becker rode for a closer look and spoke to old Sam White.

"Must be five hundred head of young stuff, all branded with the old CF iron," he commented. "Wait a minute," he whispered. "There's a bunch of old cows, branded with the Circle Double Cross!"

"We need some camp-meat," Brazos said, and raising his rifle, he shot one of the Circle Double Cross cows.

John Carson stared, then drew his belt-gun. "Hands high, Smith!" he shouted. "You're under arrest for rustling!"

SMITH raised both hands, but he spoke to Waco over his shoulder. "Better skin out that carcass," he said quietly. He avoided looking at Betty Carson. "I rustled all these calves," he told Carson. "They belonged to me, and I can prove it!"

"Prove it at the county seat!" Carson said angrily.

"Hold it so, Carson," a twangy voice interrupted, and Tiny Brock covered the angry man. "Now you listen until the

boss makes medicine," Brock said quietly. "Tell 'em, Carl!"

"You said—Carl?" Betty Carson asked.

"Carl Fenton," Brock answered dryly. "Son of the late Clay Fenton who owned the CF outfit back beyond. Rustlers hit the spread one day just before sundown. They killed every man in the outfit except Carl and me. We were out running down some saddle stock, and Carl was almost killed when he rode in. That's why he favors that left leg some and also why he carries that knife scar on his face!"

"Two wrongs don't make a right," Carson argued stubbornly. "That don't give Smith, I mean Fenton, the right to rustle another man's stock!"

"This time it does," Brock contradicted. "I see Brazos has that hide stripped off. Cut out the brand and bring it over here, Brazos."

Brazos brought the square of green hide on which the Circle Double Cross was stamped. Brock faced Tom Becker and old Sam White.

"How can you tell when a brand has been vented?" he demanded.

"That's easy," White answered. "If the brand has been altered from an old one, you can tell by holding the hide up to the light. The old brand will be even and healed up, while the alterations will be lighter and less pronounced."

"So take a squint at this one," Brock said, passing the hide to White.

"I'll be damned!" the old cattleman gasped. "The original brand was an F inside a C. Some artist with a running iron closed the C to make a circle and then added strokes to the F to make a Double Cross!"

CHAPTER IX

Rustler Against Rustler

NO ONE NOTICED when Betty Carson edged her horse back and rode out of the valley. She had been the only one to see Carl Fenton—the man she had known as John Smith—leave the group. The other men were intent on the vented brand, a brand which proved that the Circle Double Cross had rustled most of their foundation stock from the old CF ranch.

She had heard Tiny Brock tell of Carl Fenton's long battle to regain his health after being almost fatally wounded and how Fenton had hired four old cowboys who had been considered too decrepit to hold down riding jobs on other ranches. With the Circle Double Cross cattle on open range, they had rounded up old cows with calves and driven them back to Hidden Valley at night. They had slaughtered some of the older cows to conceal the vented brands and sold them as reservation beef for the Indians.

"It takes a rustler to catch a rustler," Brazos Thompson had declared brazenly. "All Carl Fenton did was take back what belonged to him, and there ain't no law back here and less than that where the old CF spread is located, fifty miles from here. . . . Where in hell did the boss go?"

Out on the high trails, Carl Fenton was riding fast. He knew every short cut through the wild tangles which had been home range for him for two long years. He knew that he could beat any pursuer back to town by a full hour or more, unless that pursuer were a man like Tiny Brock who knew the trails as well as he did.

His horse was lathered and weary when Fenton rode into Antlers just after the noon hour. He tied up in front of the General Store where his horse would not be noticed among the dozen animals standing at the rack.

Fenton saw the Circle Double Cross horse tied in front of the Oasis Saloon. He twitched his six-shooters free from hang and stooped to peer under the doors of the Oasis. A pair of polished boots faced the bar down at the far end. Several other men were standing at the bar. None heard the swish of the batwing doors as Fenton shouldered into the room.

He placed his shoulders against the wall just inside and to the left of the doors—and waited.

Dale Cross emptied his shot glass and reached for the bottle on the bar before him. His eyes raised idly and glanced into the back-bar mirror. He stiffened, pushed the bottle away, and turned slowly to face the CF owner.

"I've been waiting for you, Smith," he said quietly. "After I found out that Brock and the town law had left for the back country."

ed my CF brand and changed it into the Circle Double Cross."

"Looks like it takes a rustler to catch a rustler," Cross said carelessly.

"You willing to take your chances in court?" Fenton asked coldly.

DALE CROSS shrugged. Without warning his right hand dipped down to his holstered gun. But Carl Fenton had been watching his eyes and had seen the spray of wrinkles wink out at the corners. He went into swift and dead-

HOT PANTS

By Reeve Walker

CHAPS—the open-at-the-back leather overalls a cowboy wears—have come a long way. The first chaps were not worn on the legs, but were leather brush fenders which hung from the pommel of the saddle, falling down loosely on either side of it, so that they could be thrown over the riders' legs when he entered the brush, much as a laprobe might be split part way up its length.

Later the hide was split completely into two parts and wrapped around the legs to protect them better. The early ones fitted the leg rather closely all the way from boot to hip, and were generally called "leggings" by the early day Texas riders.

But gradually the boys got gay with them, and some of them were made of angora skin with the hair on. Some were made with colored inlays of dyed hair, silver-buckled belts, silver conchas, etc. These later fancy Dan chaps looked pretty on parade, but no cowboy would think of trying to ride through brush wearing chaps covered with two-inch hair to catch in the briars. And chaps were invented for protection in the brush; they're too hot and heavy to be worn by a working cowboy just for decoration.

"The name is Fenton," the CF man said quietly. "Carl Fenton, son of old Clay Fenton who you shot in the back and killed four years ago. Then you shot me, but your slug took me in the left leg."

The men along the bar moved back slowly. They sensed that this meeting was deadly and none of their put-in. Most of them were cowboys from the near-by ranches, for the Circle Double Cross crew was back in the tangles.

"I got most of my stock back," Fenton said slowly. "I'll get all the rest."

"Big talk," Cross sneered. "Don't forget, you are under arrest for rustling."

"Both of us," Fenton corrected. "Right now Sam White and Tom Becker are holding the evidence against you. We killed an old cow, skinned out the carcass, and held the brand up to the light. You vent-

ly action. The gun seemed to leap from his holster just as Cross's cleared leather, and the explosion blasted against the low ceiling and filled the room with rumbling echoes.

Dale Cross triggered a slug into the floor before his gun had tilted up. He was rocked back on his heels, slammed against the bar, and he slid into the trough as his knees buckled. His smoking gun fell beside him in the dirty sawdust as Fenton crouched forward with a gunfighter's halo swirling above his head.

When the polished boots had rattled out a final message, Fenton straightened slowly and eyed the spectators.

"Was it a fair shake?" he asked quietly.

"It was and long past due," an old cattleman answered promptly. "I'll testify as much at the trial if one is ever held!"

"Thanks, cow-folks," Fenton said quietly. Holstering his six-shooter, he walked slowly from the saloon.

"Carl," a voice called from the Longhorn Corral.

Fenton recognized Betty Carson's voice. He walked slowly to meet the girl who took his arm and steered him inside the big livery barn. Hoss Blake smiled and retreated to the back of the barn on business of his own.

"Yes, Betty," Fenton said wearily, while his fingers tied a knot in the tally string fastened to his watch. "That's the last one," he said heavily. "I waited for years to be sure."

"I know," the girl said gently. "He killed your father, and almost killed you."

"I'll wait here for the law to ride in," Fenton said. "They know I'm a rustler!"

"Don't say that, Carl," the girl pleaded. "You were taking back what belonged to you. Father and Henry DePaw said you would not even have to stand trial."

"They said that?"

Betty nodded and came closer. "Now you can go ahead and build up the CF ranch," she murmured. "It must get very lonely back there."

"It is beautiful country," Fenton said wistfully. "I have five of the best old cowboys a man could wish for. We've got a good cook, and a fine old ranch house. Like you said, sometimes it gets a bit lonesome."

"So?" Betty murmured, as she came close to him.

Carl Fenton took her in his arms, tilted back her head with his chin, and kissed her full on the lips.

"I love you, Betty," he said huskily. "Will you marry me, and be a cowman's wife—back beyond?"

Betty tightened her arms and nodded her head. "I love it back there," she whispered. "And I loved you even when you were John Smith!"

For a long moment they forgot everything except each other. Fenton gasped when a voice spoke from the barn entrance.

"Did you get that last knot tied?"

Fenton turned to face John Carson and Tiny Brock. Both were smiling at him, and Carson offered his right hand.

"There are no charges against you—Marshal," he said quietly. "Your contract ran for a month, remember? Now what about that rustler, Dale Cross?"

"He passed on not long since," Betty answered clearly. "He tried to kill the marshal."

"When is the wedding, Carl?" Carson asked with a smile.

"Whenever Betty says if it is all right with you and Mother Carson," Fenton answered humbly.

"You've got our blessing, and I'm glad John Smith left town," Carson said with a happy smile. "I'll always think of him as the gunman from back beyond, and he served his purpose. Let's get on up to the house for dinner. I want to introduce mother to her new son!" ● ● ●

"Come in and fight like a man," he snarled. "Come in and let me break every damned bone in your body!"

The Sun River Kid had a baby face, but he was as rough and tough as any killer who rode the outlaw trails!

THE KID from MONTANA

A novel by TOM ROAN

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It was too late to make the grizzly change his mind

Does it matter how you win—as long as you win?

BRING 'EM BIGGER

by ADAM REBEL

JUMPING up and down at the foot of the great ledges, the chipmunk's cries of indignation and sharp whistlings made her the noisiest thing in the Devil's Pocket. Bouncing here and there, always just out of reach, she balanced herself on tiny hams and angrily flicked her tail.

Here was an eight-ounce bundle of

nerves and indignation scolding an ugly half-ton of Rocky Mountain grizzly, to say nothing of the awkward cub who was the cause of all the trouble and excitement.

It was the piggish curiosity of the cub that had brought the morning invasion down by the little blue waterfall where an ouzel dipped and dived, pausing now and then to preen herself on a spur of rock.

The she-bear had merely followed the cub. Of course the basin had been upset all at once at the first glimpse of the ruffians. A fox, making her den high up in the west wall of the ledges, had poked her nose from her low doorway long enough to bark a warning. A suddenly startled hawk jerked alert, flipping from her safe nest on the other side and flinging into space with an angry squall.

Regardless of the strange mixture of its inhabitants the deep, rough-walled pocket was usually peaceful, concerned only with its own affairs. The bobcat was there, not far from an old one-eyed wolf and a lean coyote. A small flock of buzzards had their roost on a lime-smeared crag high at the lower end. Skunks had holes here and there, bees came and went. As if by some common agreement neighbors attended strictly to their own business, the more robust doing their hunting and ever-bloody fighting in the hills, the valleys, and deep canyons beyond the sanctuary.

Judged by any yardstick of fairness, the old grizzly and her cub had no business in the pocket, and there was no decency in her picking on one of the smallest as well as one of the most cheerful neighbors in the great pit. After all, a chipmunk was only a bite toward filling such enormous appetites.

Yet with all the other inhabitants fleeing or awed to silence, it had apparently become the inescapable duty of the chipmunk to rise in her small way and give vent to righteous rage. Without any sham she was letting the invaders know what she thought of them, speaking her mind eye to eye with the old bear but managing to keep herself out of the old bear's reach.

There was, of course, a sound reason for the mite-against-the-devil's showing. Along with trying to be a good housekeeper and staying on decidedly peaceful terms in her neighborhood, the chipmunk had two little ones hidden in her winding dark home in the rocks.

Except for them, the chipmunk might have fled long before. In a few long leaps she could have taken herself away from the danger. Safe in a deep crack or hole she could have waited until the old bear and the cub went on about their business, most of her neighbors in the pocket being sharp-witted enough to escape them.

But once a grizzly was moved to a notion, rare was the living thing that could force her to change her mind. Neither the wolf nor the spitting cat-fury called the lynx was foolish enough to argue with her. Even the mountain lion wanted no part of her. Sometimes they even gave up their fresh kills when this quarrelsome mistress of the Rockies came along.

This particular old fighter had killed cattle and horses in the lower country. Queen supreme, when it came to murder, she had invaded sheep camps, slaughtering right and left with single strokes of her long and tearing claws. Once she had made a terrified sheepherder drop his rifle and flee for it. Had she caught him and pulled him down she would have sampled him on the spot.

AGAINST that, what could a chattering, eight-ounce chipmunk do? She was like a mouse facing an elephant, sometimes sitting up on her little behind, sometimes angrily slapping her sleek sides, and all the time chattering and whistling furiously.

With the cub sitting on his rump in the background, the old bear took no heed of such small nonsense. Her sole interest was to get breakfast for herself and the cub. The chipmunk would make the first bite. The smell of the little ones somewhere close by told her there would be other bites. It would be only a beginning, three appetizing smacks for the big mouths.

After the chipmunks there would be

other things. There were gophers down on the floor of the pocket. By turning over half-ton stones—no effort at all for a grizzly with her great strength—the gophers could be grabbed and gobbled as they fled from their unroofed homes. Even a few fat and juicy rattlesnakes were not to be overlooked if they happened to crawl across the hungry grizzly's path. The cub would naturally take an exceptionally keen interest in the feeding as long as his mother did most of the work.

There had been nothing pugnacious about the chipmunk at the start. The rocks were rough enough for her tiny feet to cling to in going up or down but were too smooth for the bear's big claws to find a hold. Straight up to them had come the big old bear, rearing to her hind feet, sniffing and pulling as if something had told her what she would find here. Seeing the danger then, the small mistress of the hidden home had started her miniature fireworks, hopping forward and bouncing off to one side to attract the bear's attention and draw her away.

Even now, like a spoiled brat, the cub was simply waiting, scratching his rump industriously from time to time and occasionally growling at the delay. True to the general run of youth in all breeds, he never did anything with work attached to it if he could whine or shirk himself out of it. His greatest achievement was getting his mother into trouble, too often as a result of his arrogant curiosity and unpredictable monkeyshines.

The chipmunk's antics might have given a sort of rough amusement to the old bear if she had possessed a sense of humor. But a grizzly had no such leanings. This was the business of the belly—a couple of bellies before it was done, with the younger grabbing the most and choicest if he could.

Patience not being one of her virtues, the old bear tired of the play in a very few minutes and started tearing and clawing again. The chipmunk's fright went up like a lid flying from a kettle under a sudden rise of steam. Her anguish knew no bounds.

Flipping her tail, whistling, chattering, jumping, the chipmunk was like a mad thing in her fury and helplessness.

Grazed by a quick paw-stroke as she darted under a hairy forearm, the chipmunk was suddenly swept off the rocks. Landing in the soft top of a clump of sagebrush at the foot of the rocks, she flipped herself to the ground like a circus aerialist swinging down through a maze of ropes and stays from high aloft in a tent top.

When she bounced from under the clump, emitting her whistles and sharp cries of protest, she came face to face with the cub. This was really something! Here

THREE BIG, TOUGH NOVELETS

THEY RAID BY NIGHT
By SEVEN ANDERTON

FIGHTING POPINJAY
By T. C. McCLARY

LAY THAT PISTOL DOWN, KID
By CHUCK MARTIN

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was the big smart boy with opportunity looking him squarely in the eye. Little effort was needed on his lazy part to show his mother how to get it done in a hurry.

Moved by instinct to flight and at the instant too scared to do anything but move rapidly and keep moving, the chipmunk flew forward in a wild leap. Confused, she went between the cub's legs as an arched hole of light showed between his uplifted rear and the ground. She darted through, popping her teeth and whistling her fury at the same time to tell him what she thought of him and the big she-devil who mothered him.

The cub wheeled clumsily. Opportunity had been as good as in his paw at one instant. Now it was behind him, mocking him at his fat rear in a small voice. It had happened so quickly that the piggish brain in his thick grizzly skull had had little chance to follow it.

NO DEVILISH chipmunk could do this to a grizzly! As he wheeled he put her in front and below again. The cub whammed a clubbing claw-stroke down for her. She flipped away faster than a wink with a lightning flick of her tail and a whistle, and was gone behind the old bear's bulky rear. Half-falling, the cub followed in a wild lurch. In passing, he rammed his shoulder into his mother's behind, and down she came on all fours with a startled grunt and whirled to see what was going on.

The cub's one-track grizzly brain followed through, and he kept after the chipmunk. He had seen his tiny prey dart from under his mother's rear into another wall of brush. Reared up on his hind feet, rocking like a drunken man on wabbly legs, he plowed on, snarling and growling. Now he was mad and really disgusted that such a small and frail thing could escape him. With wails of woe, slapping the brush right and left with his violently swinging forepaws, he was going to crush and trample anything that might stand in his way.

A gray cone-shaped thing that might have been an old newspaper without print, about eighteen inches long and half as thick, showed ahead. The cub's mother would have got away from it as quickly as possible. But the cub had never seen a hornets' nest. With a contemptuous slap and a growl he knocked it down and gave it a quick kick.

Right then the world was set afire! The first blowtorch blaze hit the cub in the rear, coming up and from under, mad hornets having no manners. The instant follow-up was a cloud of buzzing fury to the head, the nose, the eyes and ears. Each flying little devil carried a bomb in his tail, a bursting volcano that he planted in a vulnerable spot, the pain of its sting to last for hours.

The cub stopped, slapped, snarled, wailed. He sat down flat on his burning behind and promptly got up again. His second wail sounded like that of a warrior dying in agony. Another wail started, but things were too hot to finish it. He started to run, fanning himself, trying to get away from this strange and terrible thing he could not understand, wanting nothing but to get away from it.

Now the old bear was lunging into it, not knowing what was happening to her cub. Her ignorance vanished as quickly as a spark of fire exploding gunpowder. Cloud on cloud of winged lightning suddenly settled on her and told her the war was on. She snarled, slapped her ears and face, and gave her rump a resounding pop. Then jumping and snorting like an old hog she followed the cub with streams of hornets in angry pursuit.

Back on the rocks the chipmunk whistled and chattered the glad tidings to the rest of the basin and, of course, gave herself credit for all of it. Making a greater show of herself now, she danced and flicked her tail, little hands gleefully rubbing her belly as she watched the invaders hurry up the ledges. Her sharp cries followed them, daring them to come back and finish it.

Under the waterfall the ouzel dipped and dived in the rippling blue pool, knowing little and caring less of their coming and going.

There are glittering fortunes around for the taking—IF you know where to look!

HIDDEN GOLD

By NORMAN RENARD

RIDING range one day, a Texas cowboy was almost thrown from his horse as it stepped into a hole. Although unhurt, his mount was unable to extricate itself, so the cowboy dismounted to ease its hoof from that cursed trap.

To his surprise, he discovered that the horse had not stepped into a badger hole as he had thought, but through the rotted lid of a fair-sized wooden trunk. Curious, he reached into the box and withdrew a handful of strange golden coins.

"My God," he whispered reverently. "There are hundreds of them. Thousands. I'm rich—rich!"

Trembling with excitement, he crammed his saddlebags, his pockets and his battered Stetson full of those Spanish doubloons. Even so, there was a great quantity left in the trunk. He rode rapidly back to the ranch headquarters and showed his lucky find. A mad dash to the corral followed, and the entire outfit rode hell-for-leather with him to recover the remainder of that fortune buried on the range.

"It's right over here," he said—and then uncertainty gripped him. In his haste and excitement, he realized, he hadn't noted exactly where it was.

They looked over the entire area where he thought the gold-laden trunk was buried, but they did not find it. They searched the rest of that day, all that night and for days thereafter. But neither they nor the cowboy whose horse had stumbled onto it could ever again locate that treasure trove of golden coins which would have made them rich men.

For years people have searched, and probably will go on searching. And unless someone has found it and kept it a secret, it is still there awaiting some lucky fellow. ● ● ●

Keener's left hand caught the giant's wrist in time

TENDER as the DAWN

By TOM ROAN

HARD as a pine knot, Phil Keener leaned his six-foot figure against the express and stage office and watched the crowd, the big white hat on his golden hair slanted forward to shield his eyes from the lowering sun.

His new dark buckskins had never come from a store. Those who knew about such things would have recognized them as the finer work from the Big Indian country of the upper Missouri River, the fringe and beadwork being elaborate enough for the ceremonial riggings of some great chief.

She was a mail-order bride, on her way to a greasy gent —— who meant no good for any woman!

Men paid little attention to each other on the raw frontier of the Seventies, and that suited Keener—and his business here in Crazy Fork.

It was close to four o'clock. Most of the day Phil Keener had been eyeing the crowds. All types of good and bad were here, plying their various trades, and everyone was boldly armed with knives and guns. Dangerous men who lived today and might die tomorrow.

At any moment now the big eight-horse stage would be in from Rowdy Bend, the steamboat landing ninety miles away on the Big Missouri. Each time Phil thought of it he growled inwardly.

This job was distasteful to him, and he had tried to get Blaze Bamburger to send another man, but the red-haired, red-bearded giant of Suicide River would not let anyone sidestep his wishes—not when he had that man's neck under his moccasined heel and could crack it any time the notion struck his fancy.

"Late, ain't she?"

A voice to Phil's left stiffened him. He had seen the man come up, for a mouse could not get near Phil Keener without his knowing it. He looked at the man, a short, pot-bellied fellow in ginger-brown clothes and a big derby with a rolled brim. He had a fat little face, a whopping reddish mustache, and lips that were too pink and pretty for a man.

"You're waiting for it, of course?" the little man went right on. "I am, too. Like to see what she brings in. New out here, too, ain't you? Seeing the Big Bend country for the first time? I can tell by your buckskins. Too fancy for the ordinary frontier fellow, though you do have the long hair. I spotted you from 'cross the street. I'm Hoddy—A. P. Hoddy—big promotions man about town." He made a cackling sound of laughing. Phil Keener thought of a kid goat bleating. "Might let you in on something good—money, marbles—or ladies." He winked and grinned. "I'll take you over to Dan Hardee's and buy you a couple of egg flips. They'll put hair on your belly!"

"I've got hair on my belly." Phil Keener looked at him with a glint of aversion in his eyes. "I ain't yet found no particular use for it."

"Thar she flies!" The yell came from a big black-beard in the buckskin garb of a buffalo hunter who stood in front of a saloon, looking down the dusty street. "Watch 'er come!"

A mile away to the southeast was a small ridge where the trail swung over and out of sight. Above the rise a cloud of dust was coming up like a big yellow smoke signal. Out of it pelted the high-boxed stage from Rowdy Bend.

Hoddy kept talking, but Phil Keener was not listening. He was watching excited people pour into the street from houses, stores, and honkytonks, making this quiet frontier town suddenly come alive.

Everyone saw the blood that covered the top and spilled down the side of the stage when it came rattling and swaying up the street with a tall, brown-bearded man in buckskins on the driver's high seat. One of the windows in the box had a round hole in the center of it, the rest of the glass milky where a bullet had shattered it in many splinters still holding together. In the sides of the coach were four arrows, their barbed heads buried in the hard black-painted wood. Phil Keener read them with a glance: Cheyenne, Sioux, Crow, Pawnee. A mixed bunch of Indians, probably young bucks with no sense to speak of, had jumped the stage somewhere along the road.

"Twelve miles south on Danger Crick, it was!" The driver was coughing and trying to yell at the same time as he braked the stage to a halt. "Twenty-five or thirty of 'em! Bill Davis cut the first rush down with his shotguns from the back seat! Ol' Sam Patch was riding with us from Sugar Flat, the last relay stop! Bill and Sam kept ashootin' till they died and rolled off the box!"

Phil Keener saw two gamblers in fine frock coat and big high hats pop out of the stage and wheel to help four women alight.

KEENER stared at the women. Three were painted and frilled. The fourth was a real lady, he reckoned, not just another pick-poke gal for Dan Hardeen's Palace of Joy across the street. She was tall and had big, wondering blue eyes and a cloud of brown hair showing from under one of those little blue, white-laced peek-a-boo bonnets. He guessed she was about twenty.

"Get a hatful of that!" nickered Hoddy. "Ain't she the kitten on the roof!"

"I wouldn't know." Phil Keener gave him such a cutting look that Hoddy looked away. "I reckon you wouldn't, neither. Something tells me you never saw a lady."

He forgot Hoddy. The blue eyes were looking him up and down. If she saw the tall silver buckles and the well-fitting brown belt wide enough for three rows of cartridges around him, she didn't let her eyes dwell on them.

It was time for him to move, but something held him back. Baggage was being unloaded from the dusty leather-covered boot. The mail and express box had been brought down from the top. Now the woman stood with her bags and small trunks piled on the strip of planked walk. He saw her look helplessly around.

Surely now, she would not be the one. One of the others would be better for Blaze Bamburger. But, no, all three were crossing the street to the Palace of Joy, leaving their bags and bundles for somebody else to carry.

The girl startled him by asking, "Are—are you Mr. William Oliver Bamburger, sir?"

"Why—uh—no, ma'am, I—"

"Pardon, young lady!" Dan Hardee popped up, doffing his brown beaver hat with a flourish. "Hardee's the name, madam—Daniel Hardee. I have the best hotel—"

Keener stepped forward. "She won't want it, Mr. Hardee."

"Look here, you!" Hardee swung around. "I'm a business man—"

"Dry it, Hardee." Phil Keener's right hand slid to his belt and came up with a cocked blue-steel Colt with a ten-inch barrel. Before the startled Hardee could dodge it the muzzle of the weapon was under his nose, pushing up. His head went back, the weapon holding him against the stage door. "You poke that homely pug nose of yours into this and I'm shooting it up and through your fancy hat."

"That's Phil Keener, Dan!" somebody in the crowd called. "Watch him!"

"Phil Keener!" Hardee's mouth fell open. "Ex-excuse me, Keener, I—"

"Get!" Keener holstered his six-shooter, and Hardee scurried away. Glancing back over his shoulder, Hoddy followed him, looking like a startled goat.

A big buffalo hunter laughed. "Sure, now, he'd ashot it through his hat! Phil Keener's that kind!"

"I ain't Bamburger, ma'am." Phil said, facing the girl. "Blaze couldn't come, himself." He could have added that the Vigilantes would not let Blaze Bamburger come within a mile of any town. "I come—er—for him. If you're Miss Nan Lancey."

She nodded, looking frightened as she glanced right and left. "I'm Nan Lancey. "This—" she pointed downward—"is my—my baggage."

"Right here, Phil!" Hoofs had sounded in the alleyway. Four men with six horses and three big mules with pack-saddles were now at hand, small and gray-bearded Pope Wendle having hit the ground. "Head on out. We'll take care of this and follow you."

"We can wait, I reckon." Phil Keener looked back over the staring crowd. "Sticks don't bend or break easy when they're all together." He turned back to the girl, hating this job more than ever. "I ain't a town man, ma'am. I go little as I can to 'em. I get in and out fast."

"But doesn't Mr. Bamburger have a large general store right here in Crazy Fork?"

"No, ma'am." He wondered how many more lies she had been told. "His trading post is on Suicide River, back yonder in the Indian country, ma'am."

"Indians! She turned white. "And—

and they were trying to kill us down the trail!"

"We handle 'em better in the back country, ma'am." His smile was a wolf grin as he glanced around to see that her things were being packed on the mules. "Some of us do, back in the Devil's Blow Holes, I mean."

"What names you have out here!" She tried to laugh. "Is it far?"

"I reckon it would be to you, ma'am." He avoided her eyes. "About a hundred and ninety miles by trail. We'll short-cut, making it lots less'n that. Sorry that we ain't got a lady's sidesaddle for you, ma'am. Guess you'll have to fork a man's and take it straight. Many do out here, and you'll soon find it comfortable."

"Oh!"

"All right, Phil," intoned Pop Wendle. "We're ready."

HER ARM was quivering when he took it. When he would have helped her into the saddle on a gentle bay, she pushed his hand aside and went up expertly by herself. A groan lifted from some of the rough-boots back in the crowd when her many skirts and frills flew up and exposed her almost to the knee.

"I can't whip 'em all." Keener's face was the hard pine-knot as they swung down the street. "They ain't had no decent bringing up, that's all."

"It's all right." She gave him a trembly little smile. He saw she was fighting to keep back the tears. "I— I guess I'll have to get used to— to lots of things out here."

"Yes, ma'am." He had to hold onto himself to keep from grinding it out between his teeth. "A heap of things, I guess."

And that wasn't telling her a tenth of it!

It was crazy and getting worse, Nan Lancey thought as she rode beside Phil Keener. In Golden Valley, Virginia, all her friends and the few relatives left had told her it would be like this, a mad adventure that could only come to a terrible ending. But most things had been mad ever since the war between the North and South.

Now the young and boastful were talking of another war that would right everything, return the old houses and estates to their former grandeur. Those who had been through it wanted no more burned powder and spilled blood. While youth talked and did nothing about it, the others sat and waited, and saw the rains carry away the soil of the fields and cut big gullies in the earth.

That was why she had left Virginia. No one had ever dreamed that this quiet girl would do the mad thing she had done.

An advertisement that had appeared in the Golden Valley *Rebel Bugle* three months ago had made everybody laugh— except Nan Lancey. She had read it, laid the paper aside, and had gone back to it. She thought of it now, word for word:

OBJECT MATRIMONY

Western gentleman, aged 30, with good Kentucky family background wishes to correspond with well-bred lady who might consider making her home in Montana Territory. Beautiful home and beautiful surroundings, the God's country of the world . . .

A letter seven pages long had answered her first one. Mr. Bamburger had been thoughtful enough to send a hand-colored tintype which showed himself, a neat, bold-looking man. After that she had sent her picture. In the weeks following letter after letter had poured from the frontier.

She could still hope, she guessed. Something told her that was about all as she rode into the setting sun beside this bold, handsome Phil Keener—a man others seemed to fear. He would not have been considered a gentleman in Golden Valley for what he had done back in Crazy Fork. But everything out here seemed so big and bold—bearded men, buckskins, Indians, guns. Yet, for some unaccountable reason she felt safer beside him than so many times during the long trip out here. "That'll be our camp ahead, ma'am." Night was falling when he pointed to a tiny eye that was firelight on the side of a mountain. "I left one of my men from my post to sort of fix things The fare'll be a little rough."

"Your post?" She looked at him in the shadows. "Don't you live on Suicide River?"

"No, ma'am." He looked away to the tall mountain rims in the far distance. "Some miles beyond. Painted Creek Valley, it's called. Pretty, quiet, and peaceful." He added with a smile, "My post is nothing to brag about."

"And— and Mr. Bamburger's?"

"It's big, ma'am." He was still looking at the mountain rims. "Covers nigh an acre, counting the corrals, two barns, the hide-drying sheds and the tan-yards."

"Tan-yards!" Her eyes widened. "But —but not—"

"Yes, ma'am." He finished it for her. "They are up close and they smell. Blaze Bamburger ain't a fancy man."

"Mr. Keener—" she leaned close— "please tell me what Mr. Bamburger's really like! *Please!*"

"He weighs two seventy, he says." His face had that pine-knot look again. "He's sixty-eight, he said last month, but he's still a bull of a man. I reckon there ain't more'n twenty gray hairs in his head and the beard which covers his whole belly. And—and I guess he's what you call uncaring, ma'am."

"Oh, no!"

"I'm sorry, but you asked, Miss Lancey." His thin smile was another wolf grin. "Maybe a fine woman like you can clean him up and straighten him out, but I'll tell you here—and him to his teeth—you'll have to wade in with a shovel and a hoe to make your first showing."

GRIM and silent he led her into camp under a grove of trees around a big spring on the slope. A small tent had been pitched in the edge of the brush with a soft bed of boughs covered with buffalo robes. He peeled and sharpened a little cottonwood fork from a tree for her.

"I'll cut your antelope meat, ma'am," he told her. "We use a knife on the trail for most everything."

"And sometimes," she murmured, "for killing a man, according to things I heard on the boat."

"Well, ma'am—" he smiled— "it doesn't hurt good steel."

When morning came and they were having fried quail for breakfast, he was surprised to see that she was wearing a divided skirt.

"I made the alterations," she said. "I have a small sewing kit. It was so thoughtful of you to bring some candles to see by."

"That's fine, now." He still had that troubled glint in his eyes. "There's some tough going ahead, most nigh straight up and down."

That was not half of it. By the middle of the afternoon they seemed to have climbed their way into the sky. Now they were going down and down, sometimes following ledges hundreds of feet in the air. Nan often rode blindly, gripping the big saddlehorn, too scared to look below. Just before sundown they were on the floor of a high valley. Suddenly a swarm of fifty or sixty Indians came dashing out of a low wall of timber a mile ahead.

"Hold here! Leaving the others, Keener galloped straight on. At a half-mile away he pulled up on a slight rise and took off his big hat. His hair sparkled like gold in the last of the sunlight, and Nan Lancey saw the Indians wheel their ponies, many of them lifting their hands to wave, and ride back where they had come from.

"Y e l l o w-Hair-In-The-W i n d!" Tom Spike laughed. "It's what the reds call 'im."

"But— but they turned back!"

"Yes, ma'am." Spike was grinning. "Ain't a real redskin chief in these hills what ain't Phil Keener's friend, ma'am. Some day he's going to be a big man in this country and he won't make it selling guns and rum to Indians. That's one reason the reds like 'im. They know that a white who'll doublecross his own people won't mind doin' the same to a red and they won't trust 'im."

There was no time for more. Keener was motioning for them to come on.

"They're all right," he told Nan when they came up to him. "A gang of young bucks with maybe a little too much fire-

water in them. In the morning, no later'n noon, we'll be at the post."

"Oh!" It looked as if she were about to cry. "Just—just one more camp!"

* * * * *

"Today Blaze Bamburger throws his wedding party. Four days ago we killed the young bull I got from the settler. A woman needs red cow-meat in her vitals the same as a man. This wild game stuff lacks something. It ain't every day that Blaze Bamburger gets married."

"You aim to have a preacher from Hogtown, I reckon?" old Andy Trump asked. "Being a Virginia woman—"

"Don't start that!" Bamburger rammed a big forefinger at him. "That'd cost from three to five dollars. Charley Riley, my bookkeeper, can write it down in one of the ledgers like he writes my letters for me. That'll be all there is to it."

"And if she kicks again it?"

"Kicks?" Bamburger wheeled, ready to knock the sap out of him. "I'm king of the Devil's Blow Holes Country." He swept a big hand in a circle to take in all the tall hills and deep valleys around him. "Blaze Bamburger and nobody else!"

He had seventeen white men here who danced when he snapped his fingers and a dozen old Indian bucks and fifteen squaws. Five of the latter—mere girls—were known as his own, and death to the white or red who made a pass at any one of them. The white woman who was coming would not be asked to cut and carry wood and water.

"But—" he turned on the crowd—"she ain't no queen! No flower to hang on my walls where I can hang goods to sell."

He was half-drunk at eleven o'clock, currying his beard with a wooden Indian comb, making it crackle. A long table stood on the porch filled with wooden bowls and flat squares of planks for plates. At the head and foot of the table was a new tin cup.

"Sumptious!" he grinned. "Wait'll she wrops her lips 'round some of that b'iled liver from the young cow-bull!"

"She's a looker, Blaze!" One-eyed, battle-scarred old Burt Thomas had told him at noon. He had seen them coming when they were yet two miles away.

Squaws were hurrying, placing steaming pots and huge wooden trays on the table. On a three-legged stool stood a barrel of rum, a wood spigot in the side ready for filling bowls. Big hands on his wide hips, feet wide apart, Blaze Bamburger stood at the top of the broad steps and boomed his greeting when they pulled up.

"Light and look at your saddles! Welcome to Suicide River!"

She was little but well rounded where a woman should be, he reckoned. And pretty, mighty pretty. Strong enough to bear sons and heirs for Suicide River. No gal babies. He would make that clear. Only sons, strong sons.

"Gents, meet my wife!" He stepped back with a wide sweep of his arms as Phil Keener came up the steps with her, left hand on her arm, his big hat in the other hand. "By the law of Montana Territory, my statement before a crowd makes it fair and legal. Take her to the foot of the table, Keener. We'll begin the wedding feast while the meat and such is hot."

"There—there will be a minister, of course?" Nan Lancey pushed back her bonnet when she was seated on an old powder keg at the end of the table, her voice a mere bird call in the noise, her face like death.

Bamburger glared from the other end of the table. "You mean a *preacher?* There ain't none needed. I made you my wife when you come up them steps. Here's your eating tool." He slid his ten-inch knife from its sheath, sending it spinning down the table to bury its point an inch deep in the hard wood.

"Keener—" he whirled to him—"for this I aim to extend you credit for another five hundred dollars."

"I won't need more credit from you, Blaze." That wolfish smile was on Phil Keener's face. "While in Crazy Fork I saw Spring, Street and Tillew. They give me a five thousand rating. They'll take up the nine hundred I owe you here, giv-

ing you that much credit on their books."

"Look here, you!" The giant poked him on the chest with a forefinger as hard as a gun's muzzle. "I once or twice saved your life—"

"And you're the type of man," cut in Keener unflinchingly, "who'll never let another forget a favor. That's low and rotten, a strain of the yelping whelp in any man—"

"Mr. Keener!" broke in Nan Lancey, suddenly sobbing at the other end of the table. "Mr. Keener, will— will you please take me back to— to Crazy Fork!"

"Yes, ma'am." The answer was flat and final. "I'll wait there, too, until I see you safe on the stage—"

"Why— why, you weak milksop!" roared Bamburger, grabbing him by the collar of his buckskins. "She's my wife, damn you!"

Nan Lancey screamed. One look at the giant had filled her with terror. Now she saw him about to kill the one man she had seen on this wild frontier she would most willingly have come all the way from Virginia to marry.

Bamburger could always be expected to have an extra knife or a gun. His great paw of a right hand pulled from his bosom an eight-inch steel.

Phil Keener was down onto one knee, but his left hand shot up and caught the giant's wrist just in time. In one madly desperate lunge he surged up, gripping his own steel.

Nan Lancey held her breath while the two men struggled fiercely. Suddenly it was over as a long blade was driven home, all the way to the hilt.

It was Phil Keener's knife that made a swish-swash of sound inside Blaze Bamburger's huge belly.

In a backward running fall, Bamburger struck the poled railing of the porch and splintered it. Eyes big and wild, he went over backward and landed on the nape of his neck and head, a lifeless thing with the heart cut to pieces inside of him.

"Let's finish it!" Phil Keener surged up and got his broad shoulders to the log wall. A cocked six-shooter filled each hand. "If this is dying time for me—"

"Then let us die together!" Out of the corner of his eye he looked down at Nan Lancey. In her right hand was a nickel-plated derringer snatched from her bosom. "I— I'm with you if they start!"

"And me, Phil, as usual!" Tom Spike spoke, standing with his back jammed against the corner post of the porch. In each hand was a cocked weapon up and ready, his eyes two cold buttons. Just below him stood Pop Wendle and two other men, ready to start shooting.

"Ain't no call for more violence, I reckon." Andy Trump made a gentle hacking sound in his throat. "Blaze Bamburger's dead. Now God rules Suicide River."

JUST what I was thinking," agreed Burt Thomas. "I always hated to work for a fellow I was afraid of, anyhow. A spark of fire touched to this dump, and we could all go back to honest jobs. Take the gal back to Crazy Fork, Phil, and bless her for her spunk. Tender little critter!"

"Yeah," agreed old Andy. "Tender as the dawn."

"I'm not going back to Crazy Fork!" Nan Lancey spoke up, no longer afraid. "If— if Mr. Keener will take me on to Painted Creek Valley!"

"It's be clean and no tan-yards under your nose, ma'am!" Tom Spike answered her, a smile on his place face. "Phil's folks was killed in an Indian fight on the Yellowstone when he was fourteen. Twelve or thirteen years ago. They saved the wagon and he's clung to his ma's house-fixing things and her good ways."

"But it's still the frontier, ma'am." Keener looked down, a tender light glowing in his eyes. "Somebody, though, can go on from here for a preacher—"

"Whatever it needs to make it home," she was leaning closer, "we'll make it or — or do without it."

"Preacher, huh!" Old Burt Thomas and Andy Trump were on their feet, and all the others were grinning. "Me and Andy will go right now. By good after-dark time, ma'am, we'll be in Painted Crick with him."

Freddy had turned coward—and he was sure he couldn't turn back!

"I'm Ax Martin, and I don't take no foolishness from nobody!"

THE RUNAWAY

By BEN FRANK

LONG arms and legs, straw-colored hair, faded where the sun got to it, a lean brown face, a friendly grin—to look at Freddy Fisher, you'd swear he was no different from a million other ranch-bred young men. But he was. He was a runaway, scared stiff and putting miles between himself and he wasn't sure what. The only reason he'd left the stage at Pinegrove was that it didn't go beyond this trail-end, to hell-and-gone town.

The half-dozen natives sitting on the rattly front porch of the hardware store eyed him curiously. He was dressed in

Sunday-go-to-meeting store clothes, but he didn't look at home in them. He tipped back his flat-crowned hat and let his sky-blue eyes roam the false fronts of the buildings and the tall green pines and the snow-capped mountains beyond.

"Howdy," he said with a wide grin.

"Howdy," the porch-sitters returned, more or less friendly.

There was Big Bill Bates, the deputy sheriff. Tiff Macklin, owner of the hardware and the mayor. Old Tom Tolson, the banker. Gabe Grant, owner of the big GG spread west of town. A few others, all whittling and spitting.

"Take a load off your feet, stranger," Big Bill invited, making room on the porch's edge.

But Freddy didn't sit down. His heart was suddenly hammering hard and fast, and he kept wondering what was to become of him. He introduced himself.

"Suppose I could find a job around here?" he asked.

"What kind of work can you do best?" somebody asked.

What could he do best? Freddy laughed bitterly to himself.

HE WASN'T good for anything that he knew of. Ever since that long-ago day when he'd turned coward, he'd made a flop at everything he'd tried—except book learning. He'd done all right with his studies, even if he had washed out in college sports. Then his old man had died, and he hadn't had guts enough to hang onto the home ranch.

"We could use a school teacher here," Banker Tolson said. "School's to begin next Monday, and we haven't a teacher yet. But I suppose you wouldn't be qualified—"

"Believe it or not," he said, "I am qualified to teach."

They stared at him in amazement.

"I'll be damned!" Deputy Bill Bates exploded.

He was a big rough looking man with bushy red hair and steady blue eyes. A dull tin star was pinned on his sweaty shirt. He scrubbed a hand across the sandy stubble on his square jaw and grinned faintly. "But you wouldn't want no inside job like that, herding kids around. Not a big husky gent like you."

Freddy didn't meet anybody's gaze.

"I got a six-year-old starting to school this year," Big Bill went on. "She's all I got any more—pretty like her ma was—and—well, I wouldn't want her to have a saddle-bum for a teacher!"

He waited as if he expected the newcomer to make something of that last remark. But Freddy didn't look at anyone. He sat down because all at once he felt as if his knees were going to buckle.

He had been kidding about turning school teacher, kind of making fun of himself, and had almost forgotten the matter when Banker Tolson spoke up again.

"I'm president of the school board, Mr. Fisher. If you would give us some references—"

Freddy cupped his chin in his big hands and stared at the toes of his worn boots. He had to have money before he could do any more running—and he was hungry. What the hell—he might as well add school teaching to his long list of failures.

"I can furnish references," he said gloomily.

Gabe Grant, the rancher, cussed softly to himself. He had a daughter just turned nineteen. Any man would take a second glance at her, and this Freddy Fisher was the kind of worried, lost-looking young man who would naturally arouse the protective instincts of a girl like Ella.

Scowling darkly, Gabe shoved to his feet and walked through the pale sunlight to his horse. He had plans for Ella, and having her fall for a wandering school teacher wasn't one of them.

He called over his shoulder, "Why don't you come out for Sunday dinner, Bill?"

"Thanks, Gabe," the deputy said, looking pleased.

"Bring your little girl along," Gabe said, swinging into the saddle. "Ella thinks a lot of her, you know."

"Thanks," Bill said again, his voice turning husky and his eyes getting a far-away expression.

FREDDY barely heard any of this. He was remembering back to the time his old man had sent him to town to get a load of feed. He had been fifteen then, a happy-go-lucky youngster who believed that this was a mighty fine world to live in.

That was the day two rival ranches had picked to have it out. It was the old story of water and range rights; and the two outfits had been at each other's throats for a long time. On this day, they had had enough drinks to make them determined to settle things for all time.

Whistling happily, Freddy stepped out of a store wtih an armload of groceries. Suddenly someone cursed, a gun exploded, and a man rolled into the dust, screaming with pain.

All up and down the street, guns began to blast; and young Freddy, too terrified to move, stood there, gripping his bag of groceries and watching men die.

Then a gun-triggering cowboy lunged forward, tripped over his own feet, and fell against Freddy's knees, the blood spurting from a gaping hole in his head. What happened after that, the boy never knew. The next thing he became aware of was the fact that he was home with the wagonload of feed and the groceries. But the trip home remained a blank spot in his mind.

After that, it seemed that he'd never been able to settle down. Every time he had something important to do, his heart would begin to pound and his fingers would turn to thumbs.

He figured he was just a plain, low-down coward and despised himself for it. All he wanted to do was run away from something, he couldn't say what. . . .

THE Pinegrove school house wasn't much to look at. It stood a quarter of a mile north of town behind a grove of lodgepole pines, making you wonder if the citizens weren't kind of ashamed of it.

On the outside, it looked like the beginning of a lost cause. The inside—it was equipped with some seats for the kids, a battered desk and chair for the teacher, and a slate blackboard up front—didn't look any better. There was an assortment of dog-eared textbooks, a brass hand bell to call them from play to work, and a faded globe that hung on a frayed string from the ceiling. A wicked-looking paddle behind the teacher's desk reminded the kids there was to be no foolishness.

At first, Freddy felt like a fool. A big, husky hombre like him teaching kids their ABCs! He looked like the kind of man who would run down a gang of cut-throats—the Martin brothers, for instance.

That first week, the kids all looked alike to him—just so many faces with eyes that watched every move he made. It was a joke, a scared no-account like him hired to make something worth while out of a pack of kids. If he hadn't needed the money, he would have walked out the first day.

During the second week, he looked at them and really saw them—twelve boys and girls, all different. The smallest, little Peggy Bates, the deputy's motherless baby. Pretty, with curly red hair and a lonely, lost look in her blue eyes. Dressed in a careless, un-neat way that told you she had only a man to see after her. The biggest kid, Hoot Riley, fifteen, overgrown and tough as shoe leather. Between these two were the others, including Tiff Macklin's girl, Sally, who was as smart as a whip and eager to please.

For the first time, Freddy really saw that school room, too. Bare windows. Dingy walls. Ratty old books. Wooden seats that were too big for some and too small for others. For the first time in a long while, he got sore at something besides himself.

He snorted and cussed to himself. He unhooked the paddle from the wall and broke it across his knee. The kids looked at him as if they thought he had gone crazy. He grinned at them, and slowly they grinned back. The next thing you knew, they were friends.

He pointed to Sally Macklin and said, "Look after things while I'm gone." Then

he winked at the big, surly Hoot Riley and said, "You come with me, feller."

Freddy and the bewildered Hoot went uptown. They went into Tiff Macklin's store where Freddy loaded Hoot down with cans of paint and a handful of brushes. Then he borrowed saw, hammer, and other tools from the shelves.

"I'll bring the tools back," he told Tiff, "but you'll have to collect from the school board for the paint and brushes."

He led the way into the bank and cornered old Tom Tolson. "We've got to have new books and things for the school," he told the president of the board firmly.

Before old Tolson knew what was what, Freddy had handed him an arm-long list of things for the school board to buy.

Outside again, Freddy and Hoot met up with Deputy Bill Bates. Bill took one look at the paint, brushes, and tools and decided he'd better follow this straw-haired teacher and the ornery Riley boy to see what they were up to.

Well, Bill Bates got himself put to work along with the kids, painting, cleaning, and fixing things up. He wasn't the only outsider who got stuck with a job.

Tiff Macklin, worried about collecting for all that paint, hurried through the pines to the school house. Less than a minute after he got there he found himself cutting weeds in the school yard.

The longer Banker Tolson looked at the list of supplies for the school, the madder he got. Snorting like a leaky steam engine, he strode to the school house. Somebody handed him a paint brush, and before he could get his breath, he was making the dingy walls a clean, pale green—and liking it.

WORD of these goings on got around, and a few mothers drifted along out of curiosity. They, too, were put to work. In almost no time, curtains hung at the windows, seats got changed around to fit the pupils, and new books and maps and one thing and another began to appear. Folks were flabbergasted—whoever heard of kids breaking their necks to go to school?

But in spite of doing this bang-up job, Freddy was still scared. Sooner or later, he knew, the kids would find out that he was nothing but a fourflusher. Every time he picked up the old brass bell to ring the kids in, his heart pounded against his ribs and a clammy sweat beaded his forehead. He despised himself, teaching these trusting kids to face the world and their future unafraid when he himself didn't believe in anything or anybody.

So, ashamed of his true self, he avoided grown-ups as much as possible. Before long, people got the idea he was stuck-uppish and left him alone. Freddy led a lonesome life outside school hours and took to walking alone in the mountain country to pass the time. That was how he met Ella Grant.

It was a bright Sunday afternoon in October. Freddy came to a grove of aspens that hugged the bend of a clear stream. He sat down on a flat boulder to watch the water trickle over a beaver dam. He raised his eyes, after a time, and saw the girl. She stood tall and straight with her back against an aspen.

The wind tumbled her honey-colored hair about her oval face, and there was a smile on her red mouth and an intent look in her warm hazel eyes. He almost fell off the boulder. He'd never known there could be a girl half as pretty as she was.

"Hi," she said, stepping toward him, her dark full skirt swirling about her slim, bare legs. "I'll bet you're Mr. Fisher, the schoolteacher," she said, swinging her bright hair away from her eyes. "I'm Ella Grant."

He pulled his hat off and got clumsily to his feet. Standing there beside her, he felt as big as a hay barn and twice as awkward as a one-legged coyote.

She sat down on the boulder and folded her arms around her knees. "This is my favorite place in the fall," she said. "I live just about a mile down the valley on the GG ranch."

He sat down beside her, because his legs had suddenly turned to rubber.

"I've heard a lot about you," she said.

"Little Peggy Bates thinks you're wonderful." She threw back her head and laughed, and the sound was like a summer breeze stirring the strings of a golden harp. "Did you know that Peggy intends to marry you when she grows up?"

He laughed and said likely Peggy would change her mind by the time she grew up. They talked about this and that and before long they were calling each other by their first names.

"Gee!" Ella said abruptly, "I've got to rush home. Will I see you again sometime, Freddy?"

"Yeah," he answered, not wanting her to go but unable to stop her.

She hurried away from him and was soon lost among the trees.

Now, Freddy knew that a scared-to-death like him hadn't any business making up to a girl like Ella Grant, but he had to see her again. So Wednesday evening he rented a horse and buggy and drove to the GG ranch.

How Ella knew he was coming, he couldn't guess. But she must have known, for she opened the door the moment he knocked. The truth is, she'd been looking for him every evening since Sunday—but, of course, Freddy didn't know that.

SHE had on a freshly starched and ironed print dress and a bright yellow ribbon fastened in her honey-colored hair. Her lips were red and soft, and her hazel eyes were as warm as a springtime breeze. She was breathtaking.

"Won't you come in, Mr. Fisher?" she said. "I suppose you've come to visit Pa and my mother."

Freddy found his voice. "No, I've come to see you, and—"

She gave him a warning look and led the way to the big front room where her folks sat in the yellow lamplight.

"This is Mr. Fisher, the teacher at Pinegrove," Ella said to her mother.

Mrs. Grant, a small, friendly woman, seemed pleased enough to see Freddy; but Gabe didn't bust any buttons rolling out the welcome mat.

"Mr. Fisher and me met before," he growled, remembering his misgivings the first time he'd seen Freddy. "The day he drifted into Pinegrove."

Well, it wasn't a very romantic visit. Ella hinted that maybe her folks were tired and wanted to go to bed. Mrs. Grant took the hint, but not old Gabe. He sat stiff and straight in a squeaky rocking chair and didn't budge an inch.

By and by, he swung the conversation to Deputy Bill Bates. "Mighty fine man, Bill is," he said around the stem of a corncob pipe. "Wife died a couple winters ago. Left him alone with their little girl to look after. Pretty tough for Bill."

"Peggy's a sweet child," Ella said warmly.

"A girl could do worse than marry a man like Bill," Gabe said meaningfully.

"Guess I'd better go," Freddy muttered, getting to his feet.

Ella walked beside him through the moonlight to the horse and buggy. She looked small and tired and a little scared.

"Pa's planning for me to marry Bill Bates," she said abruptly.

"Do you want to marry him?" Freddy asked huskily.

"Bill's all right," she said, not answering his question. "He owns some land and a house in town and— but he's thirty-one! And I'm just nineteen."

"I'm only twenty-one," Freddy said.

They looked into each other's eyes and then looked away like two scared kids.

"Maybe I could take you riding—or something?" he suggested.

"Well, I don't know," she answered hesitantly. "Pa— I— well, we could meet again in the aspen grove sometime."

They met a few times at the flat boulder in the aspen grove, but Freddy knew it wasn't the thing to do. It was bound to bring trouble, sooner or later.

One Friday after school had turned out, Big Bill Bates came in and stood looking about and shifting his weight uneasily from one foot to the other.

"You've done a lot for our kids, Mr. Fisher," Bill said, rubbing the back of his hand over the deputy's badge. "Yes, sir!

My Peggy thinks the sun rises and sets in you, Mr. Fisher."

Freddy was scared. He sat at his desk with his eyes fixed on the battered brass bell and his heart banging away against his ribs.

"I guess there's no sense in beating about the bush," Bill went on. "I've been aiming to marry Ella Grant for some time. But now—well, she tells me you and her have been seeing quite a lot of each other and—well, her pa wouldn't like that if he knew it, Mr. Fisher. Not that I aim to tell him, but—" He looked Freddy straight in the eyes. "To be right honest about it, I don't like it either." He rolled up his fists and slowly unrolled them. "You got anything to say, Mr. Fisher?"

FREDDY was as big as Bill Bates and younger by ten years, but he didn't have the guts to challenge the man for the girl, even though he knew Ella would not be happy with Big Bill.

Bill waited a couple minutes, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Maybe I got you wrong," he said at last. "Maybe you ain't got no intentions of taking Ella away from me, after all. . . . Well, damn it, say something, Mr. Fisher."

"Of course, I don't want to take Ella away from you," Freddy said hoarsely. "Don't worry, I'll stay away from her."

Grinning, Bill looked relieved and held out a hand. They shook on it, and Bill headed for the doorway.

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again," he said. "You're the best damn' teacher who ever hit Pinegrove!"

He stamped out and disappeared among the tall trees.

Freddy sat staring at the brass bell. Once again he was a scared kid, hearing the roar of guns and seeing the lifeblood from shattered bodies soaking into the dust of a hot, narrow street.

He and Ella had planned to meet Saturday, but he didn't go near the aspen grove that day. Instead, he stayed in the dreary room he'd rented in the hotel and watched the streaks of sun travel over the faded wallpaper.

He guessed maybe it was time to start running again. The trouble was, he'd become mighty fond of those dozen kids.

He thought about it all day and tried to make up his mind what to do. Part of him wanted to run, and part of him wanted to stick it out.

Along toward sundown, he walked wearily down the path that led to the school house. He sat on the porch steps and cupped his chin in his big hands. Anyway he looked at it, he was good for nothing, not even for making up his own mind.

Ella found him there. She put her small hands on her slim hips and stood looking down at him, her hazel eyes narrowed with worry.

"How come you didn't meet me like you promised?" she demanded. "I waited and waited, and you didn't show up. What's the matter, Freddy? You sick or something?"

Right then and there, he should have told her the truth about himself, and maybe she could have helped him. He should have told her how for six years, he'd run every time he'd been faced with something that called for a show of courage or a decision. Right now, he wanted to run away from Ella Grant, but he didn't even have strength enough to get to his feet.

"Maybe you're tired of meeting me?" Ella said brokenly. "Maybe you were just fooling me—just playing around—"

He couldn't stand the catch in her voice, the sick look in her eyes. He wanted her to leave him alone. He was like a drowning man grasping at a straw.

He screwed his face into a cruel grin and said, "How did you ever catch on so quickly?"

That did it. Her face turned white. She swung around and stumbled blindly away from him.

He wanted to rush after her and tell her he hadn't meant a word of it, but he couldn't make himself do it. Shuddering, he put his hands over his face and sat there. When he finally looked up, the stars were shining.

MONDAY morning, he went to the school, rang the brass bell, and settled the kids down to their lessons. But things were not quite the same, and the kids sensed it. For the first time, they grew restless, and Hoot Riley made some trouble.

Tuesday was worse.

"This is it," Freddy thought bitterly. "This is the beginning of another failure!"

He glanced at Hoot, and the overgrown younker glared back. Hoot had a wicked beanshooter in his desk, and Freddy knew it. He ought to make the kid throw it away before he hurt someone. But he didn't have the guts to cross a kid.

On the way to the hotel that evening, he met Bill Bates. He tried to pass the deputy, but Bill wanted to talk. He considered Freddy a square shooter and liked him for it.

"What's the hurry, Mr. Fisher?" he said. "Doggone it, between you and me, you don't mix with folks enough. You're a good teacher, but you ain't friendly like you ought to be."

Bill had other things on his mind, too. He ran his big fingers nervously through his bushy red hair and stared worriedly toward the snow-capped mountains.

"Likely to have a taste of winter any day now," he said. "Wouldn't care if it'd snow enough to block the pass. With the pass closed, I guess we wouldn't have to worry none about the Martin brothers. I reckon you've heard of them sidewinders?"

Freddy nodded.

Bill hitched his gunbelts up a notch. "Sometimes I— Oh, hell, I reckon I can handle them three skunks any time they take a notion they want to clean out Tom Tolson's bank!"

One look at Big Bill and you knew he wasn't afraid of any bank robbers—or of the devil himself.

Freddy went on to the hotel. He gave no mind to what Bill had said beyond realizing that Bill was a man without fear, a man worthy of a girl like Ella Grant.

Sitting in his room, he made up his mind. At the end of the week, he would

[*Turn page*]

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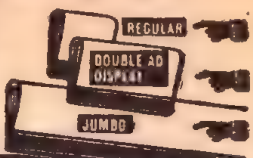

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leave Pinegrove. He would pack up and start running again.

A few days later, he saw Ella on the street. She wore a white silk blouse and a dark riding skirt, and her hair was clean and bright in the afternoon sun. He saw her in time to duck into an alley before she saw him. Slinking along the cluttered alley like a whipped dog, he despised himself more than ever. Knowing that he'd probably seen Ella for the last time, he felt a little sick.

Friday morning, he rang the brass bell and watched the kids scramble into their seats. He was going to miss these youngsters. He noticed that little Peggy Bates had got her dress buttoned up crooked and that her hair hadn't been combed. But—well, so what?

Then he saw the bulge in Hoot Riley's pocket and knew that the scowling button had a pocketful of pebbles and the forbidden beanshooter. Freddy didn't do anything about it. The next teacher could worry about Hoot.

IT WAS maybe a quarter to twelve when the shooting began uptown. Freddy was writing spelling words on the slate blackboard at the time, and the gunfire made him drop the chalk.

Some of the kids leaped to the windows. Freddy went to a window himself, but he couldn't see anything for the thick growth of pine trees.

He shooed the kids back to their seats and stepped to the front of the room to finish the spelling lesson. That was when Sally Macklin let out a frightened little gasp. Facing around, he found himself staring into the muzzle of a big sixgun.

The man who held the gun had black whiskers and frightened half-closed eyes. He took a swaggering step forward.

"Don't nobody move or make no noise!" he said loudly. His eyes bore into Freddy's. "Know who I am? I'm Ax Martin and I don't take no foolishness from nobody!"

No one said anything. Ax grinned and went on: "Guess they was expecting us at the bank. Anyway, they put up a fight. Reckon they think they'll get me now that I'm afoot." He laughed hoarsely. "They got another think comin'. Get some paper and a pencil, Mr. Teacher."

Freddy found paper and pencil. He began to feel a little sick.

"Write this," Ax Martin said. " 'To the mayor of Pinegrove, Ax Martin has took over the school. If you don't send a good saddle horse to him in ten minutes, he'll line up the teacher and the kids and start shooting 'em.' You got that wrote down, mister?"

Freddy nodded.

"When I get that horse," the outlaw continued, grinning crookedly, "I'm going to ride away from here and take one of the kids along. You can guess what will happen to that kid if anybody tries to stop me. Better write that down, too."

His narrowed eyes circled the room and stopped on Peggy Bates. "I'll take that little redhead," he said. "She won't add much weight. Write that, teacher, and sign your name and let me read how you wrote it."

Freddy finished the note and handed it to the outlaw. All the time the sickness in him was growing steadily.

"You, sister," Ax said to Sally Macklin. "Know who the mayor is?"

"He's my father," Sally said.

"Good!" Ax grinned. "Give this to him."

Sally took the note and ran out of the room.

Ax moved near a window. "Go ahead, teacher, and teach your school," he said.

Freddy shoved to his feet. He looked down at the kids. They were scared but they were all watching him closely, trustingly.

He glanced at little Peggy in her crookedly buttoned dress. She didn't understand what might happen to her. She smiled confidently at Freddy, and suddenly hot anger ran through him.

His eyes moved to Hoot Riley, the rebel. A kid who might turn out to be another Ax Martin if somebody didn't take an interest in him, and right then Freddy knew what he had to do.

"The next word," he said clearly, "is beanshooter."

CAREFULLY he wrote the word under the other words on the board. He faced about and grinned at Hoot. The boy grinned back, no longer scared now that he knew that his teacher was a jump ahead of the outlaw.

Freddy put his hands flat on the desk close to the brass bell. "All right, Hoot," he said quietly, and Hoot lifted the beanshooter and let fly.

The pebble caught Ax Martin on his left cheek. It was like being hit by a red-hot hornet. It broke the skin and laid Ax's cheek bone bare. He dropped his gun and howled, and Freddy flung the brass bell.

The bell smashed the outlaw's nose. The pain blinded him momentarily, confused him. Freddy had followed the bell. He drove Ax back against the wall with his fists and pounded him to his knees. Then Ax crumpled into a limp heap and passed out cold.

"I knew you'd fix him!" Hoot yelled. There was nothing rebellious about him now. He was just an overgrown kid who suddenly knew what he wanted. He wanted to be exactly like his teacher, brave and smart and equal to any trouble.

Freddy didn't stick around to hear the praise of the frightened folks who came rushing to the school house. Now that the excitement was over, Freddy was scared sick. He had to get away so people couldn't see how he was shaking.

He sneaked into the pines and headed for the mountains. He came to the stream and sat down on the boulder. Blood roared in his aching head, and his stomach rolled and twisted. The idea of people saying he was a brave man when all the time he'd been the biggest coward in the world!

He was still sitting there when Ella found him.

"Some way I knew you'd be here," she said. "Do you know that Bill shot two of the outlaws? But he was shot, too.

[*Turn page*]

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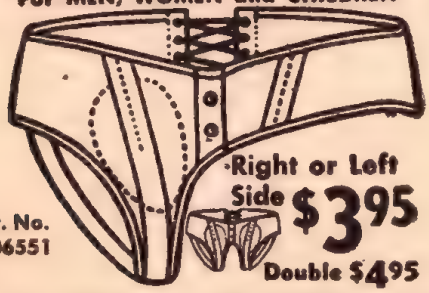

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He's going to die, Freddy, and he's asking for you. Why did you run away—"

"Because I'm the kind who always runs away," he cut in bitterly. "From responsibility—from you—from everything!"

She stepped up and took his arm.

"There isn't any time to lose," she said.

Big Bill Bates lay on a cot in the back room of the doctor's office. He opened his eyes and looked up at Freddy.

"I'm scared, Mr. Fisher," Bill whispered faintly. "I'm going to die, and I'm scared! That's why I wanted you here—somebody who ain't no coward. I figured you'd kind of buck me up—make it easier—"

Big Bill gasped and clutched at Freddy's hand. "I never was a brave man. I was scared all the time I've been deputy. I reckon I fooled folks—but that don't make me no braver—no more ready to cash in—and little Peggy—"

Life left him then, and his hand went limp.

Freddy stood there, hearing back through the years the roar of guns and the groans of the dying. He wanted to run out of that room and never stop. But he reached down and folded Bill's arms across the bullet-shattered chest.

Big Bill Bates had been afraid, and Freddy remembered that the swaggering, loud-talking Ax Martin had been afraid, too.

COME to think of it, Gabe Grant had been afraid, afraid that Ella might marry a no-account stranger. Ella had been afraid— When you got right down to it, it seemed everyone went around with a batch of fears in his heart, but most folks plugged along, doing the best they knew how.

With his shoulders squared, Freddy walked out of the room. There was quite a crowd of hushed and frightened people standing in the outer office.

Suddenly little Peggy broke away from the others and ran to him. " You going to take me to my daddy?" she asked.

He smiled down at her and shook his head. "Not now, Peggy."

He took her small hand in his and led

her out into the evening shadows. How did you go about telling a baby about a terrible thing like this without filling her mind full of doubts and fears that would torment her the rest of her life? He didn't know the answer. Then he saw Ella at the end of the board walk and somehow knew that together they could work this thing out.

"Hi," Ella said as if nothing had happened. "How about you two coming to my house for supper? We'll have fun. We'll pop corn and play games and maybe sing some songs."

She bent over and began to put the right buttons in the right buttonholes on Peggy's dress. Peggy laughed. She wasn't much worried now, and her fears were vanishing like smoke on a windy day.

The three of them climbed into the GG buggy and headed toward the valley—Ella doing the driving, Freddy staring straight ahead and thinking hard, Peggy sitting between them, feeling safe and happy.

Funny thing, Freddy thought, he hadn't lost his doubts and fears by a jugful, but he knew he was through running away from them. He glanced over Peggy's curly red head and met Ella's eyes squarely.

She must have guessed what he was thinking, for she said very softly, "Just the three of us—popping corn in the evenings, playing games, maybe singing songs—everything's going to work out all right." ● ● ●

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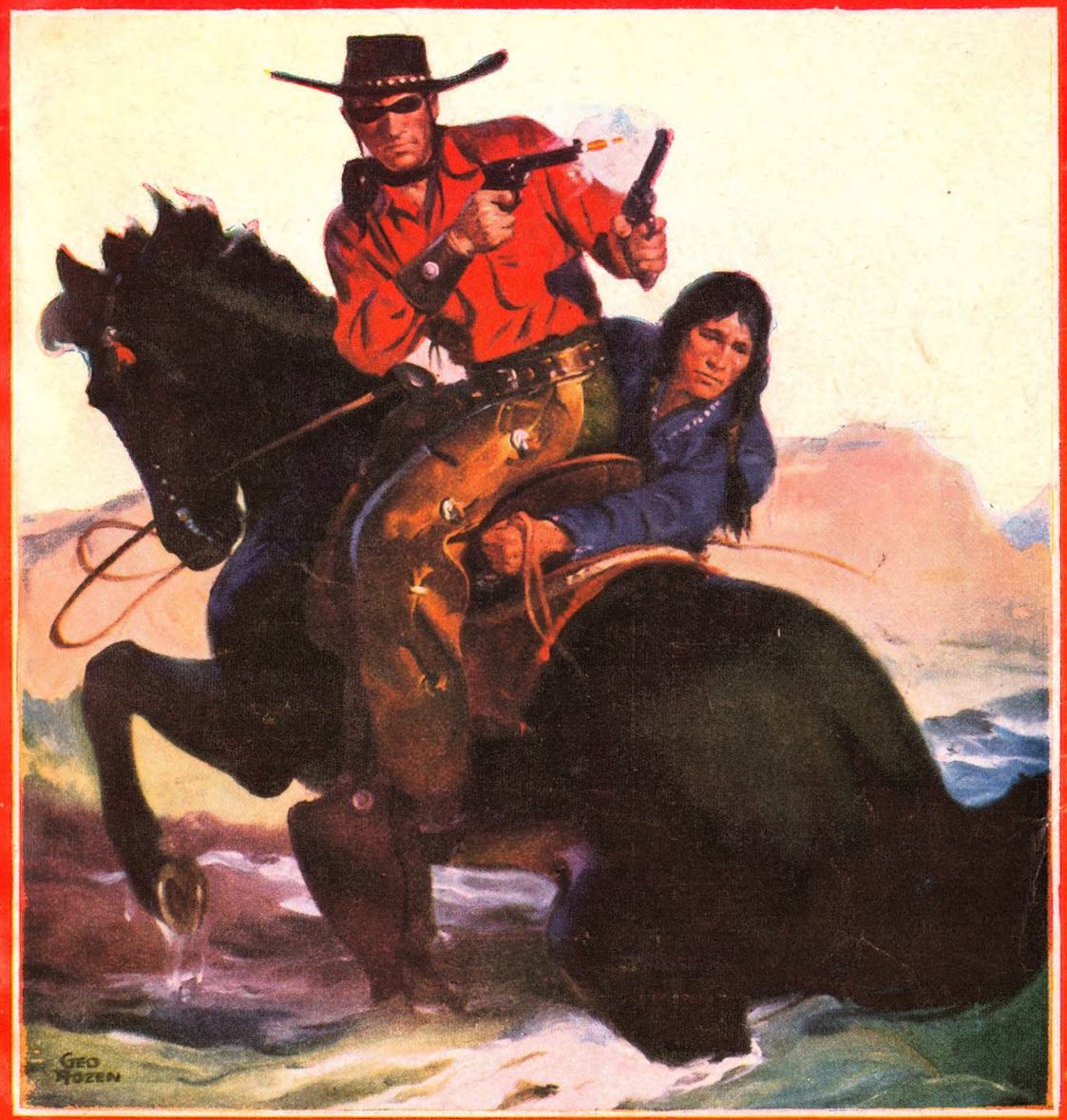

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